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WANTED: MAN UNDER THIRTY WITHOUT TIES, AMBITIONS, FEARS OR EXPECTATIONS. —That was the ad I put in the Times. And Joe X answered it. I warned Joe X the job might cost him his life. Joe X replied that that was impossible, he couldn't be killed. I told Joe X that he might be driven insane. Joe X assured me that that was impossible too—because he had no brain!

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★ ★ FIREBRAND! A. Bertram Chandler 109 ★ ★

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★ ★ 3 THRILLING SHORT STORIES ★ ★

★ ★ THE CATAAAA A. E. Van Vogt 38 ★ ★

A little classic by one of the most brilliant science-fiction writers of our day.

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Foaling devils, those biologists! They'd never rest until everything in the whole world crapt from their ghastly operating tables—even human beings!

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Why, those other-world invaders didn't even have a permit to land their crazy contraption in the town park! The Selectmen of Eastboro were never going to stand for that!

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★ ★ WHY WE MIGHT HAVE ANOTHER WORLD WAR! Aiden Lorraine 47 ★ ★

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★ ★ AMAZING SCIENCE ADVENTURES P. E. Jones & Ackerman 69 ★ ★

★ ★ MARVEL'S BOOK REVIEWS 98 ★ ★

★ ★ BEHIND THE ATE BALL A Martion Oddity 128 ★ ★

★ ★ VOL. 3, NO. 1 NOV. 1950 ★ ★

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TRIN

by ARTHUR J. BURKS

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I wanted a man willing to sign himself over to me body and soul, so I anticipated some strange applicants. But I didn't anticipate Joe X. When I warned Joe X the job might cost him his life, he replied that that was impossible, he couldn't be killed. And when I told him that he might be driven insane, Joe X assured me that that was impossible too—because he had no brain!



TWELVE YEARS AGO, IN MARVEL'S FAMOUS FIRST ISSUE, WE PUBLISHED ARTHUR J. BURKS' "SURVIVAL" AND IT WAS IMMEDIATELY ACCLAIMED AN ALL-TIME STF CLASSIC. WILL THIS SENSATIONAL NEW BOOK-LENGTH NOVEL BY "AMERICA'S MOST DARING IMAGINATION" WIN EVEN GREATER RENOWN?

CHAPTER I

JOE X

HE WAS young, not over twenty-five, and black-eyed and black-haired—a good six feet of vigorous, sturdy manhood at, say, one hundred and eighty pounds. He presented himself at my 'laboratory bearing the ad I'd put in the *Times*: . . .

WANTED: MAN UNDER THIRTY WITHOUT TIES, AMBITIONS, FEARS OR EXPECTATIONS. WRITE BOX X47, THE TIMES.

"How did you know where to come?" I demanded. "That's a blind ad."

He held up his big right hand, as though to calm me.

"I didn't get your address from the newspaper, or anyone else. I don't know how I got here. I often have lapses like this. My name is Joe X."

Like that, it began. Well, I wanted a man willing to sign himself over to me body and soul, risking his life for science, hourly and daily, as I myself did, so I expected unusual applicants. I'd run that ad for six months, and had quickly discouraged scores of curiosity seekers. I put it to "Joe X" at once, straight from the shoulder, as I had to all the others.

"The job is dangerous," I said. "It may cost you your life."

"I can't be killed," he said. "It's quite impossible."

That kind of brought me up again, but I pushed on with my standard interview without comment.

"You may be driven insane," I continued.

"No," he smiled a bit sadly at me. "That's impossible, too. *I have no brain!*"

That was the real jolt. This liar intrigued me.

"I'm an orphan," he went on. "Nobody ever wanted me. Once when I was nine and all the other kids spent Christmas with families, and nobody asked for me, I decided to commit suicide. I swallowed the contents of three aspirin bottles. As I fell into a deep sleep a shining figure appeared before me, shook his head, said: 'This is not the way; you must live your time!' I was found, pumped out, lectured, chastised. At twelve I decided to make sure. I went into a closet with a new one-inch rope, hanged myself. But the same shining figure appeared, shook his head sadly, and said: 'I hate to disappoint you, but I have to cut

the rope!' He did, too, with a big scissors. You won't believe it, nor has anybody else, but when I regained consciousness the rope had actually been cut!"

"Naturally," I said. "Spooks do it all the time!"

"Go ahead and laugh," he said. "Everybody does who hears it—of whom there are not many."

"Proceed," I said. "I can't call you a liar because I can't check back on you."

"Oh, but you can. I thought you must know that! I'll give you all the data, if we agree on something, so that you can check on the truth of my assertions! I early realized that I could not die by accident, of diseases, or suicide, or be murdered. Everything of the kind had a chance to kill me and failed. I won't detail the incidents except those which can be checked for truthfulness.

"During World War II I was aboard a ship which was torpedoed in chill waters fifty miles off the west English coast. Waves were miles high. I was thrown into the water and instantly separated from everybody else. All others were, I was told, lost. I swam easily, knowing it impossible to live in the mountainous seas. Here at last is certain peace, I thought. But the figure I had seen so many times before suddenly stood on the water near me and said: 'Keep swimming, for this is not the time!' I kept swimming, wishing I did not have to. I swam for hours when I was picked up by a British destroyer. Everybody aboard said it was impossible I should be alive, unhurt, not even very tired."

"Make it good!" I said grimly.

"It's all a matter of record," said Joe X. "I'll give you the name later, if we get together." He grinned. "After all, if you can use a blind ad, why can't I make my application under a blind name?"

"Go ahead!" I went on.

LATER ON I was part of a special flight mission over The Hump. Somehow we got far off

course. I think it was intentional, and for a purpose, but nobody told me. I was an enlisted man. After many hours we were over a portion of Tibet. That's what the pilot said. We were all on oxygen. I remember the pilot saying that Tibetan authorities had forbidden flyers of all nations to fly over this particular area. No sooner had he said this than our entire left wing broke off and vanished. We were flying at fifteen thousand, but most of inhabited Tibet is at an average of ten thousand feet above sea level. We were not far above land."

"So you crashed and you were the sole survivor!" I said.

"That's right," said Joe X. "It's a matter of record."

"You provided the record, being the only survivor," I went on.

"No, the pilot lived long enough to tell about it, in writing!"

"Oh," was all I could think of, somehow, to comment.

"The shining figure," went on Joe X, "stood on the good wing and told me I could not die in this crash, that the time was not yet, that I must do my job. Trouble has always been I've never had the slightest idea what my job is, my *real* job, I mean."

Joe X left the story for a moment, stared at the wall.

"You said you were brainless," I said. "How does that happen?"

"I was on furlough in Shanghai," he said. "I wandered into Kiukiang, off the Bund. I had never been in China before, yet the further I went along the gloomy street the more familiar it became. I had traveled it hundreds of times through hundreds of years maybe—that's how it seemed. I knew just what lay ahead, around each turn. I was in a ricksha. We were approaching a dead end. The coolie said we could go no further. I told him the way turned left. He insisted, I insisted, he refused to take me on, so I walked, and the way *did* turn left. I *knew*. I came to a silent compound with an ancient temple on its far side. I was met by two yellow-robed Tibetan monks. They smiled at me

and one said: 'You have been slow in coming!' It must have been in English, for it's the only language I know. The other monk called me by the name I shall give you if we make a deal!"

"Nice fantasy," I said. "But what about the missing brain?"

"Why," he said, arching his brows, "the monks took mine and put something in its place. It was supposed to make me perfect, but I have small lapses that frighten me. Otherwise I feel about as I always did. They said I would. They did it that way so I should not feel strange to myself."

"And what happened to your original brain?"

"They kept it. I shall reclaim it one day, they told me!"

"A neat, impossible job of trephining, I suppose, done by Tibetan monks," I said. "Up to there I could have believed you, if the surgeons were the world's best. But to remove the entire brain and supply something else—no, not even if the world's best did it, and told me so in person!"

"I didn't expect you to believe it," said Joe X. "The operation was done without pain. They used something that smelled liked incense, as an anesthetic. I saw no instruments of any kind."

"And of course they left no marks on your skull!" I sneered.

"Oh, but they *did*!" said Joe X. "You may look."

I LOOKED. It wasn't just a simple trephining job that had been done on this increasingly mysterious liar; the whole top of his skull had been completely removed and restored. The line was there to show where it had been done. I shuddered, I got the shakes for fair. I got the shakes more than most men would, I think, because of the lifetime task I had set myself.

I'm Chester Lowre, forty years of age, a scientific recluse, bent on probing the secrets of the human brain. We are told that only one eighth of the brain is used even by geniuses. Seven eighths of it is a

mystery. But Nature does not construct to no purpose. The other seven eighths of the brain...

Well, I didn't know, but I had probed deeply enough to have been wishing, the last four years, that I could manage to live for two or three hundred years, that I might dig the more deeply into the great human secret.

I studied that skull. It had the shape of high evolution. This man *could* be a genius, if skull shape meant anything—which I knew it did.

"One other thing," Joe X just tossed it in, as of no account, "I can't be hurt, either, not since the removal of my brain. I can feel inner hurt, like sorrow, heartache, loneliness, but not pain. I guess all the pain I should have known was transferred to my Inner..."

"You spoke of lapses," I suggested, interrupting to get him away from something I felt to be creepy, and better left to a later time. "Just what did you mean?"

"One of them brought me to your door," he said, "told me to knock. It's like this: I'll be walking south, here in New York City, for instance, say on Fifth Avenue. I'll notice the cross street. Let's say it's 110th. I notice what time it is. I find I don't care whether cars run me down or not, so I pay no attention to them, or to traffic lights. I think perhaps I'll walk down to the Battery. There is a lapse. I am at the Battery, sitting down, looking out on the water. I look at my watch. It is ten minutes since I realized I was walking south on Fifth Avenue—at 110th Street! There is no way, no way at all possible, by which I can travel so far so fast—not by taxi or subway...but there I am. It often happens."

"And that's how you located me?"

"Yes. I saw the ad, clipped it, went out on the street. I guess I was going to the newspaper office, or maybe to some hotel to write a letter to you. Next thing I knew *I had already knocked on your door!*"

I stared at the liar, the insane Joe

X. After all, my supreme interest is the secret brain. What did it matter to me if Joe X was a pathological liar, insane?

"My funds are limited," I said. "The hours are long. You may have to sit very still for as long as seventy-two hours. But you live here, eat with me. I have a good cook. Her husband waits on me, will wait on you. They never ask questions."

"Funds," he said, "don't matter. I always have the money I need."

"Indeed?" I arched my brows. "I wish I could say *that*. I never have enough for my scientific work. May I ask the source of your funds?"

"I don't know," he said simply. "I keep on spending what I have in my purse, *but it is always there!*" He raised his hand to silence me. "It isn't always the same bills or small change! In fact they're never the same, just the same amount, sufficient for the needs of the day, week, month! It isn't counterfeit money, either."

"You'll be very handy to have around, Joe X," I said. "Now if you just had a scientific background too—"

"Ask me questions!" said Joe X tersely.

I began asking. I made the quiz tougher and tougher. He never missed once, not even the most abstruse mathematical query. I began to ask him about formulae and experiments of which only I knew—and he knew all about those too, grinning, as if he enjoyed mystifying me!

So when I had done I said bluntly: "If you think you can stand me, I can stand you. Maybe this is the work you're here to do, if you believe in predestination. Now, your right name, please."

"My orphanage name," he corrected me. "I never knew my right one, or whether I *had* a right one. They used to tell me my mother was unutterably lovely. They never mentioned a father though I must have had one. The orphanage name is Carse Ryal Smith. They made it odd to distinguish me from other Smiths."

I WAS GOING to ask about him by telegram to Washington. But there could be other Carse Ryal Smiths. He himself suggested I take his fingerprints. The information I wanted about Joe X wasn't available to outsiders, usually, but I wasn't an outsider. I did secret work for Washington when Public Enemies were questioned.

I queried the orphanage, sending along a picture Joe X gave me, taken when he was twelve, just after the rope with which he had tried to hang himself had been "cut." I satisfied myself that it was a picture of *this* Joe X.

I had answers from Washington in forty-eight hours. Joe X had told the truth about his two escapes from certain death. Authentication was based on unimpeachable evidence, other than Carse Ryal Smith's own. Fingerprints matched.

The orphanage reports were true, also, but a bit of information, under a seal of secrecy, that made my hair stand on end, was this: Carse Ryal Smith was a trin, a triplet if you prefer. There were two trin brothers, still alive. It had been thought best to keep Joe X ignorant of this fact since the trio had to be separated anyway. I was still not to tell him. Queer, but there it was, and why I, a stranger to the orphanage officials, should be given the forbidden information *voluntarily*, I had no idea.

Plenty of mystery remained for which there was no confirmation, or only partial corroboration, so that I knew I had something of vast interest with which, and with *whom* to work.

Had Joe X's entire brain been removed? I saw the marks of the operation, which proved nothing, implied much.

What about Joe X's "lapses?" I could only answer that question by asking another, also unanswerable: how had he got to my door with nothing to help him but a blind ad?

And what about his inability to feel pain? Medical records proved that *homo sapiens* were occasionally

born lacking the sensation of pain. Such a one had to be guarded constantly until old enough to know his condition, else he could die—by burning for instance—without feeling the pain and so avoiding it.

This was easy to settle.

"You can't feel pain?" I asked, that first day, before I had answers to my telegrams.

He grinned at me. He looked at the gear on my work table, selected an electric soldering iron, switched it on, allowed it to come to white heat—then deliberately grasped it!

I yelled at him, called him a fool. The smell of his roasting palm filled my laboratory instantly. Joe X just grinned at me, clearly undisturbed. But he dropped the iron, showed me his hideously marred right palm.

This was true, too, then; Joe X felt no pain.

And what about that which happened immediately after he proved to me that he could feel no pain? What attribute of mystery was it that restored his hand to health and wholeness faster even than it had been charred, while I watched, and while the odor of burnt flesh still hung in the laboratory?

These mysteries must all be solved. If Joe X, after that, had tried to leave my service I believe I would have forcibly made him my prisoner, provided, that is, any bonds or bars could hold him. He might "lapse" himself out of them.

His "shining figure" was, of course, hallucination. No scientist could accept *that*.

"Our first work," I told Joe X, whom I continued thereafter to think of as Joe X because, if mankind was ever an unknown quantity, Joe X was the epitome thereof, "will be with my newly developed zranthon tube."

"Yes," he said gravely, "I know about it."

He did, too, and told me much of its details—not one of which, as far as I knew, had ever got out past my door. The name *zranthon* I had in that instant coined; he nodded his head when he heard the name, as if he had always known it!

CHAPTER II

THE ZRANTHON TUBE



I AM ESPECIALLY interested in people belonging to what "normal" folk call the "lunatic fringe." I am acutely aware that Jules Verne, H.G. Wells, the Wright Brothers, Louis Pasteur, Paracelsus and many others, belonged to the fringe in their own time. Then they became the "greats" of the world. I've no intention, personally, of passing up any of them. I spend my spare time digging in old book stores—there are many down around Astor Place—for fiction and non-fiction done by members of the lunatic fringe which have ended up where, I dare say, "normal" people feel it belongs.

I am interested scientifically in the esoteric. I do a lot of wondering about mediums, seances, fortune tellers, geomancers, people who not only believe in reincarnation but insist they can remember past lives—who's to prove they *can't*?—and people who know what's going to happen in the ages to come.

If they're specific in their "findings" I take their material into my laboratory. If some lunatic fringer "remembers" machinery used in Atlantis, like nothing modern man ever dreamed of, I'm never satisfied until I have a look at the possibilities.

My current investigation, and so far the most interesting, was based on the "prophecies" of a lunatic

fringer raised to the *n*th power. He held that there was a perfect way to communicate between persons, and that future races would make use of it. If, for example, I am thinking of a road, and use the word "road" in my conversation with another, the road of which I speak, and the road he sees in his mind when he hears me speak the word "road" are invariably and inevitably vastly different. Our experiences are different. The esotericist said that the time would come when man, *naturally*, would show exactly what he meant when he used a word or phrase, because the picture of his thought would appear on a *natural* screen beside his head as he spoke. What he said would be so carefully and exactly detailed on the screen that nobody could possibly misunderstand his meaning. Newspapers, books, radio, television, contracts, blueprints, *machines*, plans, maps, prospectuses, letters, paintings, drawings—all these and many more were, he said, the *forerunners* of what he called the "mental screen" with which man would one day be born.

I found it intriguing, and... I was about to say reasonable, but that I wouldn't be able to say, one way or the other, until I had exhausted every investigational possibility. My interest was in the submerged seven eighths of the human brain. Dreams, nonsense, hallucinations, *s p o o k s*, prophecies, visions of past lives, even the *belief* in past lives, were all mentally produced somehow, and therefore matters of legitimate interest.

I took nobody into my complete confidence about these matters in detail. I personally did not care to be considered as being in the "lunatic fringe."

But I told Joe X that I was interested in developing, if scientifically possible, the "mental screen." The screen itself, since man was not yet born with it, had to be made. I had worked with it for two solid years, with little rest and with little thought as to whether it would be

commercially valuable.

I began with the cathode-ray tube. I developed it to the place where I could project an image of my thought, somewhat blurred, upon an electrical field. I did not question whether the brain radiated electrical impulses. I didn't care. I wanted to discover. I was able to set up a field of unknown dimensions, in a given area of ordinary atmosphere, which was different from anything outside it. I knew it was different, but not how, for not only was my tube, the zranthon tube, inside the "field", but I had to be also! In other words, I couldn't study the mental projection for much the same reason a man can't lift himself by his own bootstraps. I couldn't go and stay at the same time.

I had to have someone with whom to work. It had to be *his* mental images, inside the zranthon field, so that I could study them without concern. Man and tube must stay inside the field, for the tube *made* the field, and the man *thought forth* the images. How? I wasn't yet sure. That it was cumbersome there was no doubt. What good was a means of communication if the communicator couldn't go anywhere or say anything? But many beginnings are discouragingly cumbersome.

I wanted to measure the field. I wanted....

"You want a mental screen," said Joe X softly. "You want to prove that such a screen is possible. Too bad, isn't it, that I have no mind?"

HE HAD A sense of humor, then, and therefore a mind, no matter of what it was made, natural or synthetic.

"You'll do," I said. My laboratory was far out on Riverside Drive, in a greystone house inherited from generations of Lowrcs, all of whom had strange avocations. I was no anti-social, but I couldn't do all I wished and spend time talking to friends and neighbors. There was so much to do, so little time. One day I would make sleep unnecessary... but that was something else again. "But

remember, it may blow up and scatter the house, me, the laboratory and you all over New York City."

"No," he said, "I'll walk out of any such explosion without a scratch, unless," he looked hopeful, suddenly, "it happens to be my time when it happens!"

"I wish you wouldn't act as if you couldn't endure life!" I said to him sharply. "You may well be in a position right now to do something sublimely great for humanity!"

"That would be too bad!" he answered. "Why should I?"

I could think of no reason why he should, nor did I try to argue. Man must settle his own arguments with life, people and destiny.

"Can you think of anything better to do?" I asked.

"Yes, do the thing that keeps me from being unutterably bored! That's why I answered your ad. When do we start?"

Joe X became a member of my household then and there. Somehow he contrived not to seem strange to Hattie Hyde and her husband Zack. I noted that Hattie often stared at him as if he had three heads, and that Zack never spent much time around him, but that wasn't unusual. They both behaved much the same way toward me. Maybe they thought I had produced Joe X in my laboratory!

Joe X seated himself comfortably in an easy chair in the middle of my workshop. I cleared everything away around him for a distance of fifteen feet in all directions. I did not believe that the field extended further than that, nor higher than the ceiling, also fifteen feet and the reason why I decided on fifteen feet for the other two dimensions.

The zranthon tube was two feet long, six inches in diameter, and if I hadn't told Joe X he wouldn't have known where it was. No, that's wrong, he *knew*! It was the "third arm" of the easy chair. It swung between the two regular arms to form an arm rest, slid back in slots in the two arms so that it could be near to or far from the person in

the chair. Contact with the sitter was, apparently, required. A man could sit with his elbows on it, face in hands, could sit forward and nap with his forehead or cheek on it, do anything with it he wished, so long as there was contact. But principally, he *thought*.

Contact with any part of the human body by the zranthion tube rendered it operative. It began to build the zranthion field as soon as Joe X sat down and swung the third arm into position. I could call the field "magnetic" or say that it was an area of "ionized air" and be approximately correct. The zranthion tube's operations were, however, somewhat different. The tube *built* the field, invisible brick by invisible brick, or whatever it was that was used—one of the things I hoped, with the help of Joe X, to find out.

I moved away from Joe X, sat down facing him, to watch. We were just two ordinary human beings, staring at each other from a distance of fifteen feet, like mute idiots. In a few moments I spoke to Joe X. He touched his ears, shook his head. He could not hear me. He knew I spoke because he could see my lips move. A few moments after that I knew he could not see, either. He just sat, and stared. I got scared, though it had gone no further than it had with me, dozens of times. But Joe X, with that scar around his skull, might not be able to stand all I knew I could. I rose determinedly and strode toward Joe X. I couldn't reach him. I stopped stockstill, almost fifteen feet from him. I wasn't up against a stone wall. I was up against something intangible, invisible, but real. I was *stuck*! I could approach no nearer.

I went all the way around Joe X. He seemed to be surrounded by, to be comfortably sitting in, an invisible cylinder. He did not follow me with his eyes. He might already be dead. If no images of his thoughts appeared I would soon know he was dead. Some minutes must yet elapse before the images could be expected.

I went clear around the cylinder.

Then I got a stepladder, stood close against the cylinder, climbed, fumbled at the top. There was a space of perhaps ten inches between the cylinder's top and the ceiling. Unimportant, maybe, but one never can be sure, so I recorded it.

I WAS SOON aware that Joe X had been much concerned because I had doubted some of the things he told me. His first mental image, quite clear in the depths of the cylinder, standing near Joe's right hand, was what I knew to be his "shining figure!" I stared in amazement and unbelief. I had seen *statues* of that type by the hundreds. But this image seemed to be alive. It could see me. It smiled at me, bowed slightly, raised its hand. I'm an atheist. I don't believe....but a scientist can't say he doesn't believe anything, not until he has proved its untruth.

I was an investigator. I now investigated. As I had just circled the cylinder, so I now circled the shining figure. It did not turn to face me as I walked. It, simply, continued to face me without moving at all! I gulped, swallowed. Could this *really* be something in the way of communications, indicating that the man of tomorrow, equipped with my invention, or naturally, would be understood in his words and thoughts by anyone who could see him, whether facing him, back to him, or in profile? I was going too fast. This was just an image.

But was it just an image? I had neglected to take away the step-ladder I had climbed to determine the dimensions of the cylinder. It stood, sidewise, almost in contact with the cylinder. I almost bumped into it. As I would have touched it a queer thing happened: the "shining figure" shot forth a hand as if to remove the stepladder from my path. The hand touched the ladder, pulled. The ladder tilted over into the cylinder and *completely vanished*! It was, suddenly, neither in nor outside the cylinder.

Moreover, the "shining figure" dis-

solved into something else: a street scene in Shanghai. I knew it because I knew Shanghai. I would have known it anyway because of Joe X's story. I saw Joe X entering a compound. I faced the temple about which he had told me. Two yellow-robed Tibetans came out of the temple. Tibetans? They were no more Tibetans than I am! They were dressed as Tibetans. They had long hair, like Tibetan sorcerers. Their headdress pulled their faces so that their eyes slanted ever so little; but they were not Tibetans. They were...

Both figures were staring at me. When I thought, "*They are not Tibetans*", both men touched fingers to lips, shook their heads. I tried to erase "no Tibetans" from my mind. Thereafter they ignored me. They took me through the operation of which Joe X had told me, which Joe X never saw but now did, the one in which his brain was removed and something left in its place. I would have accepted what I saw as gospel truth but for one thing: it proceeded from Joe X! Even so, as a study of the human mind, it was interesting. Actually, it looked as if the brain of Joe X were taken from his skull in a weird bit of bloodless surgery, and lowered carefully into a huge transparent jar of some colorless liquid where, I knew, it continued to live!

But if they put anything in the brain's place when they readjusted the skull—which I watched them do with immense admiration for their technique—I didn't see what it was. It *could* have been nothing. Joe X, if this were true, *could* be brainless, literally!

SUDDENLY the cylinder was empty of anything but Joe X, the easy chair, the zranthor-ray tube.

I could see into the cylinder far enough to see Joe X in some detail. I could not see through it. I heard an odd sound, such as the stepladder might have made if, while standing, it were jiggled. I couldn't see it. But I went around the cylinder, and there

it was, somehow returned from the "field."

Then, for ten solid hours there was absolutely nothing! Just Joe X, the zranthor-ray tube, and the easy chair. The field was not extending, I knew, but its force was building up. I could see it in the subtle changing of Joe X's body. I could feel it all around me. The atmosphere seemed to crackle without actually crackling. Great power was growing here.

Preparation was being made for something cataclysmic, and I began to be afraid. I could not communicate with Joe X by any regular means. He could only communicate with me via the field, but could neither see nor hear me. I don't like being afraid. It isn't a good way for any scientist to feel. I couldn't reach Joe X. He could only get himself out. I had explained to him just how to do it. Had I made a mistake by giving him credit for knowing more than any man of twenty-five could possibly know?

Maybe he could understand, at that, for suddenly Joe X's voice broke in.

"It's all right, Mr. Lowre, it's going forward properly." He grinned at me, too, clearly now able to see me.

"Can you hear me also?" I asked.

"Of course. The field is now complete. The time has come to probe more deeply. But there is no way I can help you, Mr. Lowre, and remain inside the field, as I must—and you are going to need help. You need two qualified assistants."

I sometimes used assistants. I had a working arrangement with several laboratories, some private, some industrial. I began running them over in my mind. I was looking at Joe X as I thought.

"There are Crandall and Bogan, at the M.A.C. Labs," I thought.

Joe X shook his head! He kept right on shaking his head until, stumped, I shook my head in turn, after naming every young assistant available to me, whom I had ever used.

"Run through your Red Book Directory," suggested Joe X. "Pick the laboratory that sounds right, telephone and explain that you need someone who knows how to work...."

"I'm still running this laboratory and this experiment," I told Joe X stiffly. "I think I shall know what to tell an assistant!"

"I'm sorry, Mr. Lowre," said Joe X, instantly contrite. "I guess I'm too deeply interested in the experiment."

"I'm sorry, too," I retorted. "Inflated ego has no place in this kind of an investigation!"

I felt ashamed as I thumbed through the Red Book, picked an outfit, dialed, told someone on the other end what I wanted. Two young GI's were available and eager to pick up a little extra change. They would be with me in an hour. Their discretion could be relied on. Uncle Sam had used them both in top secret jobs and still did when needed.

The two young men, serious, neatly dressed, were about the same age as Joe X.

I shook hands with them. One was Clyde Baird, a brunet, the other Dan Partos, a redhead.

They introduced themselves. I shook hands with them. I knew I had never seen either before. But they looked vaguely familiar, a feeling that continued to grow inside me. It nagged at me, made me uneasy. If either had ever seen or heard of me before, neither gave any sign. I wished I hadn't sent for them, and instantly regretted my suspicion.

Both men stared at Joe X when I took them into my laboratory. Joe X stared back. I introduced everybody. Clyde Baird started forward to shake hands, stopped as I had stopped. Dan Partos stood fast, noting that something held his companion as if he had frozen in place.

Both turned and looked oddly at me.

"Ionized air, but more advanced," I explained, thus explaining nothing.

What really interested me at the

moment was that Joe X seemed not to know either man, nor did they show any signs of recognizing Joe X. Why I had suspected they might, I don't know, for I had chosen no laboratory suggested by Joe X. He hadn't suggested any; yet, since he had mentioned the Red Book, he had suggested all of them that used telephones!

I explained what the two needed to know, told them it was highly secret. They nodded. We agreed on an honorarium. This done we turned our attention to the cylinder, Joe X...and the three baseball-sized black balls which were a feature of the first *scientific* image. They rested at three corners of a kind of rack, also ebony, that seemed to *stand*, not float, just inside the cylinder, within easy reach of all three of us.

CHAPTER III

THE BIG MARBLES



I NOTICED for the first time that the easy chair no longer sat squarely on the floor. It had risen to a foot or so above it. If Baird and Partos noticed they gave no sign. They did notice the black balls in the tray, or rack.

"What are they?" asked Partos.

I didn't know. I wasn't ready to explain.

"It's routine to turn solids into gases," I said, "by fire, by gas, by any number of ways. It's easy, simple, to reduce created things, forms, to their component parts, rendering

them, usually, invisible, though often still fragrant for a time. Here we are reversing the process. We're taking what we need from the atmosphere and giving it visible form."

"How?" asked Baird. "And what are the black balls?"

"I don't know," I said. "We're trying to find out."

For some minutes we stared at the three black balls in the equally black tray. Each ball seemed to rest in a pocket, half of its sphere above the level of the tray. The balls were at the apices of an equilateral triangle about two feet on each side. I hadn't the slightest idea of what they were composed, or how they came to be where they were. I waited for enlightenment while Baird and Partos circled the cylinder, sat beside me again and said they could see the three black balls in the black tray, inside the cylinder, all the way around back to the starting point. But neither tray nor balls seemed to move.

There seemed no sense in what we saw. There was no possibility of getting close to them. They seemed to be about six feet inside the cylinder, above the spot where the shining figure had stood, where the "Tibetans" had performed their weird operation. All three of us had had the experience of trying to step into that field. None had made it.

But nothing happened. There were no new figures, no change in the balls. Several minutes that seemed like hours, passed. Then the tray moved toward me until one side of it, in which was the pocket containing one of the balls, appeared to be outside the field.

It was a peculiar way for an "image", a "thought form", to behave. Theoretically, my theory was that only inside the field built up by the zranthon, was it possible for a mental image to be seen. Here was part of one proving the theory false.

It would not be tangible, of course. Like the shining figure and the Tibetans it was a thought, or thought sequence, empty of substance, weightless, intangible, virtually nonexistent.

I looked at Partos, to my right, at

Baird to my left. They were waiting for me to make the obvious move. I made it, expecting no sensation whatever—and touched a solid thing with my extended hand! I felt the edge of the black tray. I touched the shape of the black ball clearly outside the zranthon field. It felt like a huge marble. It was somewhat larger than a baseball.

I came to a decision. I caught the tray by the corners, as a waiter would have done, withdrew it from the field. It remained intact. The black tray and the three black balls were still visible, tangible. I held the tray in my left hand, my hand under the tray's center. The whole thing weighed, at a guess, twenty pounds. I touched each of the three black balls with my fingers. All tangible, actual, of some material I did not know, causing a sensation in my fingertips like nothing I had ever experienced.

"Somehow," I muttered, "we've reversed a natural process. But what have we constructed? It isn't metal, wood, plastic...I don't know what it is."

I turned to the two assistants. I held my hand over one of the balls. I told Baird to hold one, Partos the third, to keep them from crashing to the floor, if they were free in their pocket, when I inverted the black tray.

Each of us held one of the black balls. Without looking, I placed the tray, with its three "pockets" on my chair. I didn't turn and look at Joe X. I sensed that he was watching. What did his "brainless" brain see in all this? I am frank to admit that I had no idea what we had done with my zranthon-ray tube, my zranthon field, and the strange brain of Joe X. Our real investigations began right here; we must find out. We might have something useful, something dangerous, something utterly without value. *But we had manifested it.*

I WAS AWARE of a peculiar happening. I moved, apparently without my own volition. Baird moved, his eyes popped on the ball held up in both hands. Partos moved. All

three of us halted and I noticed that the three balls, as held by us, were now in the same relative position to one another as they had been when first seen inside the field.

But were they? What made me think this? I could see no differences between them. They were black-ball triplets, a quick visual examination indicated. I was trying to make too much of a mystery out of them. But I called the assistants' attention to the fact I have mentioned.

Deliberately then we shifted positions.

"Put the balls down on the floor!" I commanded.

We bent together, placed the balls carefully, holding them a few seconds to make sure none of us imparted impetus to any one of them. Of their own accord, then, they rolled, halted... in the same relative position they had been when first seen on the tray in the field!

There was still no reason to believe anything more than that of their own natural accord they rested in the form of an equilateral triangle, like water seeking its natural level. The balls still had no individuality.

I picked up one. Partos took one. Baird took the third. We separated by many feet, held the three balls high, allowed them to drop. I distinctly heard all three balls drop. They hesitated for a moment after they landed. Then they began to roll, to converge on one another.

They came close together, paused, moved this way and that as if maneuvered by invisible hands—came to rest a second time in the shape of a black triangle! I thought, then, of turning to look at the tray on which they had manifested, at Joe X sitting inside the field. The black tray, with its empty pockets, seemed to be laughing at me, showing toothless black gums.

Joe X just sat. There were now no other images in the field. We three closed on the black balls, lifted them. They had been dropped, had made sounds....

"The floor made sounds, not the balls!" I told Baird and Partos. "Do either of you have any idea what

these balls are made of?"

"No!" they told me together. The balls seemed to be perfectly round, without blemish of any sort. I took time to examine each of the three. And dropping them on the floor hadn't so much as scratched one of them. Rolling in the dust which was never entirely absent from my laboratory, had left no dust on any of the three.

The balls had an eerie lustre of their own. I could not see into any of the three, nor did any one of them reflect my face. I suspected that they did not absorb or reflect light.

I placed a ball in the hand of each of my assistants, kept one.

"Find out what you can about them for two concentrated hours!" I commanded. They fell to with a will. So did I. I started first with my own hydraulic press. I shoved a ball into it, applied the pressure slowly at first. Nothing happened that I could see. The press touched the ball and stopped, literally, completely. Nothing I had ever before pressed so had failed to "give." Nothing could. But the ball did. Even the most exacting vernier reading, before and during, indicated no difference. Maximum pressure was sixty-three thousand pounds.

The black ball, of unknown—as yet—material, was totally unaffected by the pressure. It was impossible. It was also true, unless I was seeing things.

And this ball came out of some eerie combination of Joe X's brain, the zranthon-ray tube, and my theories—working on the wild idea of a member of the "lunatic fringe!"

I took the ball out of the hydraulic press.

I examined it with my best microscope. 'Sixty-three thousand pounds of pressure hadn't so much as smudged it, or left a rough place on it I could feel with my fingers—or find with my most precise micrometers!

It seemed to be a huge pupil-less black eye, staring at me, unblinking. I was almost afraid to stare back.

This thing had come somehow out of the brain of Joe X. I thought what

would happen to his poor head, with the mark of trephining all the way around it, if I were to put the skull under the press and start applying it. It would crack like an eggshell at far less than the pressure applied to the black ball. Yet somehow, by thought, Joe X had produced it.

I had been seeking to show *thought images*, electrically manifested spooks if you will. I had never dreamed of producing form, certainly not spheres, trays, pockets in metal trays, triangles.

I let the ball rest for a moment, put the tray into the hydraulic press. I could do nothing with the tray, *nothing*. It seemed to be of the same material as the three balls. I tossed it aside. I caught up the ball again, as it was rolling toward the balls held by Baird and Partos, attempting to take position again, I knew.

I lighted a Bunsen burner, held the ball over the flames with a pair of tongs. No smudge appeared on the ball. Moreover the flame, when it touched the ball, stopped. It didn't penetrate, did not spread, and there was no slightest suggestion of soot!

I withdrew the ball, wetted my forefinger with saliva, touched the ball where the fire had touched it. I need not have been afraid of burning. The temperature had in no way been altered by the flame from the Bunsen burner!

I thrust the ball into my beer refrigerator, left it for half an hour, while I watched the frantic efforts of Baird and Partos to mar, smudge, scratch or shatter the other two black balls. Then I removed the ball from the refrigerator. Its response to extreme cold was the same as to heat—*nil*!

DURING those two hours we smashed those three balls together. We flung them at the walls. We operated on them with diamond drills. We dropped them into a vat of acid that came as close to being a universal solvent as anything so far produced. The effect was—none! We dropped all three balls into the vat at the same time, watched them roll into position, form the inevitable triangle.

I began to wonder about the triangle. So did the other two. We tried something. I pasted a green one-cent stamp to one ball, a red two-cent stamp to a second, a blue three-cent stamp to a third. Then we allowed the balls to form their triangle, took measurements.

The triangle formed was always definitely equilateral, each side 23.978-plus inches long! We experimented a score of times. The triangle always formed in the same way, exactly. The ball bearing the green stamp always took a position which would have placed it directly on a due north-south line. A perpendicular drawn from the center of a line connecting the other two balls, extended northward, would have passed directly under the center of the green-stamp ball.

Why?

What was the significance of the triangle? Of the three balls? What eerie force, acting outside the field which had brought them into visible actuality, pulled them back into the triangular shape when they were free? Why did nothing we did to them effect them in the slightest?

But wait a moment, the stamps stuck to them! As if in answer to the thought, the stamps fell off!

We had exhausted our ingenuity for a moment. We had done everything we could to smash, mar, smudge, shatter or smear the three black balls. Nothing had happened. We stood above the triangle, staring down.

As if our concentration were an awaited signal, as if The Moment had come, all three balls rolled about, each about its own apex of the triangle, with a startling eccentricity, considering that they were perfect spheres. They *wobbled*! We hadn't altered the shape of any of the three. Now, apparently, something *had*!

But what?

We bent, lifted the black balls.

I discovered the odd bars on the surface of the ball I held. Baird exclaimed, Partos swore. There were odd bars on each of the three balls. I couldn't see the bars in the one I held, because they were merely up-

raised ebony. But they formed a triangle on the surface of the ball, a triangle which my fingers told me was equilateral, later proved correct. The same measurement proved that a perpendicular drawn from the exact center of either of the three sides to the opposing angle, the junction of the other two sides, was exactly 3.769 inches long!

Each ball was exactly the same size. Each triangle on the face of each sphere was the same throughout!

Out of the zranthon field, then, had come three exact measurements—those of the triangle formed by the balls in relation to one another, the three triangles on the surfaces of the three balls, and the sizes of the three balls.

These mathematical facts must have some meaning.

I had not the slightest idea what it could be. Neither, I realized, had Baird or Partos.

No three men had ever been more enthusiastic for investigation.

We went to work on the small triangles with our fingers—as if they had been the dials of ebon safes.

CHAPTER IV

WHITHER PARTOS?



SINCE MY experiments for years had been with mentality, with thoughts, I could scarcely have picked a better assistant than Joe X. He was the supreme egocentric. Since he had been very little he

had been anti-social. All his thoughts, feelings, emotions, had turned inward, to a complete absorption in self. His life was almost entirely *mental*. It had been so for almost his entire twenty-five years. If his background had really been what he must often have feared, if he had been, were, illegitimate, his mother's mental and spiritual turmoil must have had its effect on him in his infancy.

He was perfect for my purposes. I knew that with his help I would discover the facts about the mental screen the lunatic fringer had foreseen for man, when he should have advanced, far in the future, to a place beyond anything yet known.

I began to form some queasy suspicions about Joe X; suspicions which nevertheless filled me with excitement.

These black balls were in our hands via the mind of Joe X. I did not for a moment believe him mindless in spite of what I had seen in the field with reference to his "operation." He could have made that for me, deliberately, to bolster his own story of his past.

Joe X seemed to know everything—why did he not know, why was he kept from knowing, that he was a trin?

I liked mystery, but was never satisfied until I had solved it, and the more abstruse the better.

There had been no bumps, certainly no raised triangles, on the three black balls. Now there were. Their number had significance. Three balls. Three triangles. Three sides of each triangle the same length. The balls themselves naturally rolling to a position forming a larger triangle.

Here was a means of communication grown out of another, far in the future, means of communication.

I fetched a small table, set the tray in its exact center. I took the north-ball position, placed Baird to my left near the second ball, Partos to my right near the third ball.

"We'll experiment on something new in Chinese checkers," I said. "I'll keep track. This is the way safe-

crackers of real skill find the combinations of safes. They keep eliminating. Now, raise your hands above the black balls. Your left hands, since I must use my left, my right being occupied by a pencil and paper.

They obeyed me, first moving the balls in the tray pockets until an apex of each equilateral triangle was directly opposite each man's chest.

"Now, with your left thumb," I said, "press on the left side of your triangle. Run your thumb up and down, back and forth. Twist. Keep working it until I tell you to stop—just the one side!"

We all did the same. I wrote down what we were doing, to avoid future duplication of effort. Nothing happened that we could see.

"Now, use your thumb on the right-hand side!"

This we all did. I made the record.

"Now, thumb on right side, forefinger on left side. Twist, press, run your thumbs and forefingers up and down!"

Still nothing happened. Three black eyes seemed to stare and glare at me, to mock me utterly. I felt like a fool, but in working with the human mind—and what else is there—one often does.

"Press both thumb and forefinger on the base of your triangle as if you were operating a telegraph key!"

That produced nothing, either.

I tried every combination of which I could think, carefully recording each one. In every possible way we twisted, pulled and hauled on the three triangles. In an hour we were sweating from head to foot. Then I called for time out, copied off what we had so far done, gave each man a slip, turned them loose to experiment as they saw fit. I could think of no fresh combinations of three.

ALL THE time Joe X sat in the zranthon field as if in a caty-leptic state. I wondered if he were conscious of all we did.

Were we, with all our blundering, actually twisting and turning the brain of Joe X? The thought gave me the shudders. I had applied the

hydraulic press, we had smashed the things to the floor, against walls, worked diamond drills on them, dropped them into acids. And yet, if we actually were taking liberties with some strange offshoot of the brain of Joe X, could we be shocking it any more than life had so far shocked Joe X himself? It occurred to me that the human brain, even the one eighth part which science claimed to know a *little* about, was about the toughest thing in existence. Even insanity didn't harm it much.

I was looking at Dan Partos when it happened, but I couldn't for the life of me detail just what occurred. Partos swore, became impatient. He raised his right hand high, brought it down, palm flat, against the triangle on his black ball. That action was one I hadn't thought of, though it was the most obvious of all.

I *think* I saw Partos' palm contact the triangle. I wouldn't swear that it actually touched. *There was no time involved.* I saw the palm, swiftly descending, driven by Partos' anger, frustration and impatience—and Partos no longer existed! That's what I said. His chair was empty! It was as if he had never even been there. I stared at the ball he had slapped. Nothing had happened to it. Baird looked at me with something utterly queer in his face. Then he felt in the empty chair for Partos. His hand played through the space which Partos had occupied. It encountered nothing he could, in any way, feel.

Partos was *not*!

The first expression of macabre humor then came from Joe X, out of the zranthon field. An eerie chuckle came, unmistakably, from the lips of the man whose mind we were using in this series of experiments. We had no idea where Partos was.

Baird slid into Partos' chair, stared at the black ball.

"It's smooth again," he said softly. "The triangle is gone!"

I stared at my own black ball. It still had the raised bars, the perfect triangle. Baird, his face white as a

sheet, slid back into his own chair, stared at the third ball. It bore the bars which formed the perfect triangle. Only Partos' ball was smooth again, as if his slap had driven the raised portions back into the ball. But we knew that sixty-three thousand pounds of pressure could not do that, for we had had one of the balls, triangle uppermost, in the press. Not the slap, but the combination, had altered Partos' black marble!

"Dollars to doughnuts," croaked Baird, "Partos dived right inside the black ball!"

Joe X answered that, to my startlement.

"No! He's in the room, unhurt!"

Joe X was again the topflight liar. We could see everywhere in the laboratory, and Partos simply wasn't anywhere. He was as big a man as Joe X, could not be hidden, any more than he could have been compressed into the black ball.

Just the same, Baird and I rose and began hunting for Partos. We looked in the most unlikely places. He wasn't anywhere.

One place, the only one we could not search, was the only spot left: the zranthon field. We had never so far been able to enter it.

"He's inside the field," I said, "but he's not a mental image. The field shows only the mental image. The ball must have provided some channel into the field, since it came out of it."

THE OBVIOUS thought came to me, making my heart stop. There was only one way to be sure and I doubted if I had the nerve to try it. It was like volunteering to die to find out what happened during death, with only someone's theory to make you feel secure that there was a mechanical return available.

I stared at Baird. His face was at least as white as mine must be. We didn't have to exchange words to understand that the same thought had struck both of us. I could volunteer to go hunting into the invisible, or into the field, but that would leave Baird alone outside, lacking my

meager knowledge of the attributes of the zranthon-ray tube. I could not go and leave Baird.

I could not send him, deliberately, not knowing how to return him. I could not rely too much on Joe X, whose brain had produced the incomprehensible black balls, the series of triangles, one of which had disappeared now with Dan Partos.

"Both Plato and Socrates," I had read somewhere, "required students who wished to master philosophy to take courses in pure mathematics. Both great teachers regarded mathematics as the correct introduction because cold reason was needed in all solutions, which could in no wise be effected by emotion."

The black balls, the main triangles, the small triangles, were symbols, signals, code! But try and prove it!

"If something happens to us," I said, as Baird and I faced each other across the remaining two balls on which the raised triangles appeared, "Joe X, Carse Ryal Smith, will be all right. He can exit from where he is at will!"

"I wasn't thinking of him," said Baird quietly, firmly, "but of my friend Dan Partos. I'm afraid, but wherever he is, he may need my help. Let's go!"

We held up our palms to begin the slap. It was like a mutual salute. We looked down at the balls so as not to miss. We held our breaths as our hands went down, struck the two balls.

There was no effect whatever!

The combination which had worked for Partos did not work for either of us. The balls, then, were *individual*. Each was different from the other, though in no way we could yet explain. Yes, there was now an explainable difference: our two balls bore the triangles, Partos' big marble did not. But much good did the knowledge do us!

Yet in the smooth ball and perhaps the two triangled black spheres was hidden the mystery of the disappearance of Dan Partos. It nested also, I felt sure, in the brain of Joe X.

"Where is he?" I asked Joe X.

"It has to be a matter of record to

be worth anything," said Joe X. "There is an experiment which will show it. It must be made. Otherwise it remains the figment of your mind, my mind, and the zranthon-ray tube's diffusion of the two together!"

That really made a lot of sense, didn't it?

"We've got to try again with both balls," said Baird. We sat down to it. We went over the combinations again. Both of us twisted the balls in their pockets, altering the locations of the apices—and crashed our palms down on them, to no effect. We twisted the tray around. We did everything, and nothing was of any use.

FINALLY we set the two barred balls aside and concentrated our attention on the smooth one. After all it had figured somehow in the disappearance of Dan Partos.

We got nowhere.

"I wish it were small enough to swallow!" said Baird in exasperation. "Or that I had a big mouth!"

"The only way we can consume the ball," I said, "is by doing it mentally. After all, it's a thought-form! We can try."

We placed the ball on the table between us, pushing aside the tray which held the other two balls. We stared into it, or at it, since one could not see into it. I don't know what Baird did, but I tried to enter into the ball, to become one with its secret, to merge with it. I blanked out everything else, and for some minutes several queer things happened. I found myself swimming in mountainous seas. I had been, I knew, torpedoed. It was so real I could have yelled in terror, if the shining figure hadn't stood upon the water beside me and told me I was not to die. I was picked up by a British destroyer, and that was also very real.

I began to realize that if I could "hold a thought" with this ball as the center, I could participate in the life of Joe X. I could test the truth of his stories, could experience his experiences, all written indelibly on

his subconscious, whence the balls and tray had come. I deliberately switched to the orphanage, and found myself hanging by a stout rope. Again the shining figure, and I was literally cut down.

I would know, now, about the missing two trins...

It did not seem possible that Joe X should be in ignorance of them. Nor was he! He knew, but did not know that he knew. The two brothers-in-one-birth were part of Joe X, but he had never consciously known of them, as so carefully had his past been hidden from Joe X, he had never suspected with his outer mind. But it was utterly impossible to separate from one another, completely, three who had lain together in the womb.

Excitement grew in me.

The three black balls were, in some eerie fashion, Joe X himself and his brethren! The desire on Joe X's part to sluff off life grew out of his inability to rejoin his trin brothers. He did not know of them, only that something was missing from him, from his spiritual *inner*, which he felt he would never find.

Where were those two brothers? I sought the answer, while concentrating on the black ball, in the orphanage, somewhere out west. I got nowhere. They had never been in the orphanage which had had charge of Joe X. I had to go back beyond that in time, but could not, because Joe X had never been back beyond that—as far as his brethren—during his conscious life.

I began to realize that the tray had a bleak, sinister, fearful meaning! Normally, it held the black marbles. It must also hold their secrets!

Had Joe X hated his mother? Was that why the tray was black?

I was deeply involved in these and other absurd questions which might or might not have meaning, when I was jerked back to consciousness of my surroundings.

Joe X, somewhat fearful and restrained, was calling me by name. I looked around. Clyde Baird was no longer present!

I LOST no time clutching the remaining two balls, studying their surfaces. Two balls were now entirely smooth. The Unknown had swallowed Clyde Baird as completely as it had swallowed Daniel Partos!

I stared at Joe X.

"Where's Baird? Did you see him go?"

"I saw him go," said Joe X. "He wasn't even watching the other two balls. He was staring into the smooth ball as you were. Without apparently thinking about it, he put his hand aside. He must have touched one of the balls in the right way, or...I don't know. He just disappeared."

"Where is he?"

"With Partos!"

"And where is Partos?" I demanded, my voice utterly shrill with my rising terror.

"Baird and Partos are the answers to your experiment, over in the back of the book," said Joe X. "You could get the answers from me, perhaps, but the method of attaining them would remain forever unknown. You have to work it out!"

"I need help, plenty of help," I complained. "But I can't keep getting assistants from other laboratories, to have them vanish without trace. What am I going to say to their employers when they don't show up, anyway?"

"They must show up," said Joe X. "We must find them, restore them to here! Somehow, I must help you. I don't see how, but we can experiment. I can always return to the field if things don't go right, and you'll be no worse off than you now are!"

Joe X stepped down from the easy chair, pushing aside the zranthon armrest. He walked easily out of the field to stand beside the table with me. He stood there, studying the three balls. Just so, I thought, a man might stare at his own brain if by some weird necromancy it could be removed, the man remain alive to stare!

One thing I had to get set right now. I had to give us plenty of time. I couldn't have the laboratory which

had sent Baird and Partos, bringing police in on us. How could we explain the inexplicable? Not even the most enlightened cop was going to listen very long to my story of the zranthon ray while two young ex-GI's were obviously missing. They'd take the laboratory apart, cart Joe X and me off to jail.

That I knew, would spell catastrophe.

I telephoned the laboratory, explained somewhat haltingly that I was in the midst of a delicate experiment and would need the services of Baird and Partos for at least seventy-two hours more, perhaps even longer.

The director of that laboratory, with whom I was sure I had negotiated for the services of Baird and Partos, answered me with a delicate sarcasm—which still had the effect of a battering-ram smashed against the skull.

"In view of the fact that, not since I have been this laboratory's director, and that's been for fifteen years, have we had any assistants named either Baird or Partos, you may keep 'em from now on for all of me!"

Thoughtfully I clicked down the receiver, turned back to the table where Joe X studied the black balls.

I studied this strange, unearthly, now *outré*-seeming man with a new fascination. He looked like anybody else, more or less, his size and shape. He appeared a fairly decent sort of chap.

But was he anything whatever that he appeared to be, however queer or normal?

CHAPTER V

BOOTSTRAPS OF JOE X

JOE X seemed trying his best to help me, but ever and anon I thought I detected a secretive smile on his face. I early began to wonder if he were not in some fashion the monster to my Frankenstein. A tremendous change had taken place in him, caused, I thought, by his lengthy immersion in the zranthon field.

After Joe X came out of the field I tried to enter it, just to discover if his emergence changed it in any way. It did not. The field remained. I returned to Joe X, busily hunting the way to the solution of my basic problem. I had proved to my own satisfaction that the mental screen was possible, not in some future age, but here and now. Future ages might produce people naturally endowed with the screen; I'd settle for it as a mechanical thing which men could sell—like telephones, radio, television.

I sat down across the table from Joe X, who was handling the black balls, staring at them almost stupidly. The man appeared to be hypnotized still.

Immediately after the disappearance of Baird, but one of the three balls had been distorted by the raised triangle. Now I took all three from Joe X's hand, to discover that all three were utterly smooth!

How did it happen that the third triangle was no more, as if its mission had been accomplished, and nobody had disappeared? There had been no change at all, except that Joe X had stepped out of the field! Was that the reason?

Hitherto Joe X had seemed utterly brilliant. Now I was not so sure. He could have been a moron coming out of a coke jag.

"How do you like the zranthon treatment, Joe?" I asked.

He seemed not to hear me at first. Then he stirred, looked up at me. His tongue must have been as furred as his mind, because it was almost impossible to understand him when he answered:

"Zranthon? Zranthon? What's that?"

Yet prior to going into the field he had told me, its inventor, all about it. What had happened to the man, anyway?

I stared at the big black marbles and wondered even more. The eerie lustre seemed to be going out of them. They had hitherto seemed alive. Now I scarcely knew what to think. Good pearls come to life on the neck of a vivacious, beautiful woman. Lying shut away in a

drawer they lose their appearance of life. These huge black "pearls" were doing the same thing. They almost seemed to be *dying*!

"I don't know what's happening to them," I said to Joe X. "We did all we could to destroy them. Nothing worked. Now that you are out of the field, they're dying. When we put top pressure on them..."

Joe X seemed not to hear me at all. He was holding one of the balls in his right hand. Whether in answer to my statement, never completed, about applying pressure, or as a reflex action of his own, I don't know, but Joe X closed his hand on that ball. It shattered in his grip. It didn't break like an eggshell. It didn't crack, or rupture; it *shattered*!

Without looking up at me Joe X dribbled the ashen remains of the ball into the tray pocket whence he had lifted it. It overflowed the pocket about enough to prove to me that it had been a solid. There was nothing inside it different from what I had seen outside. The ashes of the black ball were as black as the ball had been.

Joe X reached for the second ball. I was afraid, for he was a powerful man, mentally disintegrating before my eyes.

"No, Joe," I said. I expected him to react violently, maybe even attack me, try to kill me. His brain was struggling with some problem I could not reach. I remembered his statement that he had something inside his head in lieu of a brain, the brain being kept alive in far-off Shanghai. Was the substitute now deteriorating? Was Joe X dying mentally, even as the black balls were dying?

I feared so, but I was going to take risks. There was so much I did not know. How his money was replenished, for one thing—if it was: what brought about his "lapses" and how he traveled while they lasted.

I knew, considering his obvious and continuing deterioration, that I was violating no secret with my next statement.

"You are a trin, Joe, did you know that?"

He didn't lift his head. He merely stared at the ashes of the black ball he had crushed.

"Carse Ryal Smith," I said.

He raised his head, looked at me with eyes as lacklustre as the black marbles.

"You are a trin," I said. "You have two brothers, did you know that?"

"Of course," he muttered, as if someone else were speaking for him. "We all have two brothers, or two sisters. One is Yesterday, one is Self, one is Tomorrow! We always seek them. We never find them. That is why we are always empty. sad, unsatisfied, resentful, hating—we are *never whole*! Fate keeps us forever incomplete. But I had hoped when I came to you...."

HE LOST track of the thread of his speech then, could not find it again. It was as if someone had shut him off, kicked his shins under the table lest he reveal too much. What he said, if there were any sense in it, opened up a whole new realm of investigation to me. It seemed fairly obvious that a man lived in his present and his past, *looking forward* to the future—usually for some utopian perfection forever moving away ahead of him. Was this what Joe X meant? Was this the meaning of the esoteric statement that man was triune and timeless?

I shook my head, casting off the cobwebs spun by the lunatic fringe of whom I had read too much. A man couldn't put his past or his future on the scales and read it. Only the psychologist and psychiatrist could analyze a man's past, and who could prove whether they were right or wrong?

I set Joe X's remarks down for the babblings of a brain unguided, unsparked, last words poured out of it like last drops poured from a water bottle.

Joe X forgot the ashes of the one ball, forgot the other two balls. He rose from the chair, as if he were lifting a tremendous weight. He wasn't fat, didn't look any older, but he moved as if he weighed many

times a hundred and eighty, and were an octogenarian. It was *most* strange. On top of that the other two balls were becoming of no interest whatever. They were almost dead. Now I could crush one myself, I thought. I did it, just to assure myself.

Then I crushed the third ball. I don't know exactly why I dumped each handful of ashes into the pocket in the tray whence the ball had come.

I took note of the tray.

It was *not changing at all*! It looked as mocking, as wise, as ever. I could almost hear its laughter.

Joe X had paid no attention to the tray. Now Joe X was walking around the laboratory. He looked at each implement I used in my work. My stuff was the last word, and very expensive. If I couldn't buy the best I didn't buy. Joe X lifted various items, my microcamera, my microscope, my calipers, my weighing devices, my osmotic syntheses, my electrolytic jars. He slammed each one down afterward while an expression of utter contempt touched his features. His face was now that of an imbecile—what right had he to be contemptuous of my topnotch equipment?

"What's wrong with the microcamera, Joe?" I demanded.

"Fifteen thousand years behind the times!" he said. "Thought form of a congenital idiot!"

That gave me the creeps, for certain, though everything the man said and did seemed to be a door opening. Yet when the door stood open I lacked the vision to see beyond it entirely. Just hints, glimpses, ideas. I must put them together. Then they would be something.

Heavily Joe X walked around the laboratory.

I would have sworn the floor sagged sometimes under his weight.

"Joe," I said gently, "how long has it been since you weighed? How about stepping on the scales?"

Had the zranthon field, building itself up to where it operated successfully as a mental screen, so successfully in fact that thought forms

became material forms, filled Joe X himself with material, making him heavy beyond any man's right, mentally and physically?

Joe X looked around him stupidly, located the scales, lumbered toward them. He got up. I was right behind him. The urge to boost him almost overcame me. I felt he might resent it. And he was a mighty man at this point, slow though he was.

THE INDICATOR on the scales shot to the limit. There was a whirring, a crashing sound, and the scales were useless! They weighed up to an even one thousand pounds. Joe X had not been too careful, stepping up, yet if he had jumped up and down on it he could scarcely have done the damage he had now done merely by ponderously mounting.

Joe X got down, looked at me, then back at his easy chair within the zranthon field.

"Joe," I said, "where did Baird and Partos come from?"

He snickered.

"You needn't worry," he said. "they're back there!"

I thought as much, and I didn't mean by that that they were back at the laboratory where I had at first been so sure I had got them.

"Joe," I pursued my train of thought, "may I have all the money you have in your pocket?"

He didn't hesitate. He was slow, fearsomely slow and ponderous, but he delved into his pocket, came out with a worn wallet, tendered it to me. I took out all the money it held—five worn twenty dollar bills. I carefully noted their serial numbers, thinking myself a gullible fool as I did so, then thrust the bills into my pocket, returned the billfold to Joe X.

I kept trying to analyze this new, mysterious, stupid Joe X. He was bigger than he had been by far, but not in size. It was as if his bigness extended outward, invisible and intangible, as if he bore an unseen burden. He was taller by far, though still but six feet. His voice was the same, but blurred, as if it were a radio being jammed, as if his tongue

were thick with anesthetic or numbness.

He was a muted dynamo, a powerhouse under the sea, a blanketed lightning flash. If ever he were freed...but by whom or what could he be freed? I sensed that the freeing, and with it a murderous destructive devastation, might come at any moment. Yet knowing this, feeling that certain security was mine only while Joe X sat inside the zranthon field, I kept putting off the moment.

If this monster who looked just as he had, yet didn't, got out of hand, went berserk, I was a dead man. I would never solve the secret of the disappearance of Baird and Partos. I'd never know the complete formula for the mental screen, or the secrets of the tray, the triangles and the black marbles.

"Joe," I said, "who took you to the orphanage? Did anybody there ever tell you?"

"Nobody took me," he answered. "I just went. I was just *there*. I used to ask. The women always looked at one another, scared, but nobody ever said. I asked if my mother took me. Nobody told me yes or no. But they said she was beautiful."

"How did you feel about your mother?" I went on.

"The same as I do now."

"How is that?"

"I hate her completely. If I could get my hands on her I would tear her apart. She reminds me, when I allow myself to think of her, of my blackest moments."

"And the shining figure in your escapes from death," I pursued. "Does she never remind you of your mother?"

"She?" he repeated. "The shining figure is that of a man!"

"Are you sure, Joe? Would you listen, even to save your life, if it were a woman?"

He shut up then, refusing to talk further. I looked back at the black ashes in the pockets in the tray. They were as they had been. The tray, of all things in the laboratory connected with the experiment, remained unchanged.

I had pushed time, and Joe X, and destiny, to the last split second—in the sacred name of science.

"Joe," I said, "you'd better go back into the field and sit down. We still have work to do."

PROBIDENTLY the lumbering man entered the zranthon field. Not until he was inside did I realize what a tremendous mental feat he had performed. I had not been able to do it, else I'd never have run that ad, asking for an assistant. Joe X, quitting the field to experiment with his own thought forms, to help me, give me hints, had actually, in effect, lifted himself by his bootstraps. He had gone out and come in at the same time. He had risen and dropped at the same time. He had spoken and remained silent at the same time. He had done something no human being of whom I had ever heard—even the "masters" of the esoteric—could do.

Nor was that all. He sat down in the easy chair, closed the third arm, leaned tiredly on it. I heard a click from the tray, turned. There could have been no click. *There was no time!*

The three black balls, lustre, life and all, reposed in their pockets in the black tray. Something, something which I could not grasp mentally, for just a moment, had restored the balls to their ebony perfection from the ashes we had made of them! What? "Contact" effected when Joe X and the zranthon field again became *en rapport*?

Out of the field, in Joe X's normal voice, came this:

"You now have all the elements of your mystery, Mr. Lowre," he said. "I can show you no more, tell you no more! With superhuman effort I have told you more than I should have—against most impressive opposition!"

In a lefthanded way he was explaining why he had seemed such a lumbering idiot, outside the zranthon field.

Yes, I had an inkling. But some mysteries remained, of which the most important were these: (1) *who were those Tibetan monks in yel-*

low robes? (2) *What, actually, was the shining figure which seemed to stand between Joe X and death?*

(3) *Whither had Partos and Baird gone?*

I knew the meaning of the triangles, esoteric as well as scientific, but could not put the meaning into words, therefore could not prove their meaning in this particular experiment.

I needed several things.

I needed, first, a physical connection for the black tray which, throughout all this mental maneuvering, had not changed in the slightest.

Leaving Joe X in the field, apparently recuperating, I left the laboratory, the house, repaired to the nearest telegraph office, where I spent every bit of cash I owned, including the one hundred dollars I had taken from Joe X.

If my theory was correct, my next assistant would be a woman, a specially selected one!

I placed these new ads by telegram, prepaid. I scattered them somewhat, feeling inspired.

Even as I did so I wondered again about Baird and Partos, particularly about the telephone call by which I had first obtained their services. With whom, actually, had I talked? Had my selection of that laboratory been the whim I had thought it.

The silly idea came to me: *It didn't matter who you telephoned, you'd have got Baird and Partos!*

I really believed that; but who had them now, and why?

CHAPTER VI

ASSISTANT FROM NOWHERE

WILL MOTHER OF
CARSE RYAL SMITH
KINDLY CONTACT DR.
CHESTER LOWRE 211X River-
side Drive, New York City.

That's the ad I shipped out to fifty newspapers scattered around over the United States. How did I select the newspapers? Just as I thought I had selected the laboratory which I thought had sent me Baird and Partos. I had a feeling

that if fate intended me to find the woman I would find her. She would...I had no idea what steps she would take.

Much time must pass.

"We haven't eaten anything for forty-eight hours, Joe," I suggested.

"I could do with something," he said. That soothed me. I half expected him to ignore me or say that while he was inside the field, busy with thinking, he had no need for food. I rang for Zack, told him to bring food enough for four men. He looked around in amazement, shaking his head. He was always expecting the unexpected of me. Why was I ordering food for four when there were obviously but two of us present?

"We haven't eaten for forty-eight hours, Zack," I said lamely, on the defensive before my underling. "Besides, we're expecting company."

Zack set up a table where I told him, just outside the cylinder. He never came in contact with it, or he would have thrown a fit. But it had its effect on him. His hair stood straight out from his head like a fright wig. He felt it, put his hand to his hair, looked at me accusingly.

"You're always funning with the old man," he said. "Only, you don't look as if it's any fun!"

"Zack," I said, "it isn't, not a bit!"

Joe X stood inside the cylinder to eat. He wolfed his food. He was rapidly becoming the Joe X I had studied at the height of his powers in the zranthon field. I was hungry enough, but nothing compared to Joe X. He ate, and ate, and ate!

When he had done I pushed the table back, Joe X returned to the easy chair. I studied the tray and the black balls, all of them now completely smooth. No, now that Joe X had returned—what other reason could there have been?—the third ball showed the black ridges of the third and last mysterious triangle. When that triangle vanished, with Joe X still inside the field, there would be some sort of solution to my problem of the future of man—the mental screen which would make misunderstandings between man and man impossible.

"Joe," I said, "I want you, if you're strong enough, to form on the screen the thought-forms I mention."

"Shoot!" he replied. "I think you're cooking with gas! You're fumbling, but do scientists of this day and age ever do anything else?"

"Should I name what I want to see, or merely think it?"

"Either, but saying it makes it easier. Remember, though, what you think, and what I think when you speak, may be entirely different. Then again, Mr. Lowre, you can make thoughts on the zranthon field, from right where you are!"

"By holding the balls, one or all of them or the tray with balls, in my hands?" I asked. "I've been wondering about that."

"There are combinations, always," said Joe X. "Two combinations have been operated. They 'translated' Baird and Partos!" He chuckled; as he had once before, as if he knew something so obvious I *should* know.

"Let's leave it for later, Joe," I said. I wanted to work up to something gradually, not obviously, so that Joe X would not suspect my motives.

"I'm thinking, and picturing in my mind," I said to Joe X, "A winding black water stream in Central Brazil, the Cururu...."

I saw the river very plainly as I thought it out to him. I thought it in detail, and willed him to show it on the field.

HE MANAGED a river, but it was no river I had ever seen. It represented Joe X's reflection of my thought, what he gathered from my detailed mental description. Its waters were clearly black, because I had said black—but Joe X had to fight mentally to make them black. They varied from colorless to light green, to blue, to brown, to black.

"A church," I said next. I thought of a little church I had seen in the jungles of Haiti, long ago. I named the church, began to describe it. Instantly Joe X thought it forth on the mental screen. This time the church varied in many details from what I remembered of it, but it was

recognizable as the native church at Ounaminthe.

"That's scarcely fair, Mr. Lowre," said Joe X. "I've visited that identical church, within the last year!"

"Even so, it's far from the way I remember it," I said. "What I can't understand, as this experiment progresses, is how we ever manage to understand, one another at all. I'm accustomed to people reading into letters what I never wrote, and adhering to the meanings even when I insisted in person and face to face that nothing of the kind was intended, but now I can comprehend why even words of explanation are more or less wasted. People simply don't understand one another! They're not supposed to."

"Not while they are prevented from communicating directly, without the use of synthetic channels—like telephones, words, gestures, smiles. When man speaks mind to mind there will be no misunderstandings. But he must earn his way by *learning*!"

I shut off his sermonizing by shooting a series of words at Joe X.

"Show me a *paxiuba* palm tree!"

He showed me a cocoanut palm, vastly different.

"Now a two foot square of *koa* wood!"

He showed me a square of mahogany! Even Joe X had to laugh, a bit ruefully.

"Anyway," he said, "it's real mahogany. Take it out if you want."

I didn't. I erased the thought form by substituting another, the only way mankind can really exercise control over his thoughts.

"You 'create' mahogany, then destroy it, erase it," I said to Joe X. "I wonder if all the forms we see, everywhere in the world, are man-created things which have escaped from mental screens?"

Joe X did not answer. I could tell that he was wondering what I was leading up to. He knew that I would not be asking questions aimlessly, just to kill time. Did he know of the telegraphed advertisements I had just broadcast? I had told him nothing of them.

"Show me a waterspout," I said

next. "Now, Niagara Falls! Now, the Empire State Building" I gave him time only to outline these various things, then spoke others. "Now show me a streamlined train! Now a Skymaster plane! Now a set of pool-balls, correctly numbered, racked up to start the game" he did this one quicker than the others, but I was pretty certain he didn't have the stripes and colors correct. I wasn't too sure because I couldn't myself remember! That could well be a flaw in communications when the mental screen became a commonplace: man might very well not know what he was thinking about!

"I'd like to see your shining figure again" I tried to make it casual. There was a bit of hesitation. I had the feeling, though, that it wasn't because of anything suspicious in my request. To Joe X the shining figure was one to be revered, a supernatural being of great spiritual power and beauty.

I SENSED, for the first time, a great struggle, emotions warring against emotions, belief against lack of it. I saw the shining figure begin to take shape as a thought form. Then I saw something else: the thought form taking charge, helping Joe X to manifest the shining figure. The whole time required to bring the shining figure into such complete form as to make him seem an actual person. My pulse hammered in my brain. The black balls were real forms, solids, *material*—could the shining figure be real also? In Joe X's past experiences, when he had been thwarted of committing suicide, when he had been saved from drowning, saved from death in an airplane crash, Joe X could not possibly have produced the shining figure as a thought-form. But what was hallucination but a thought-form, a phantasm?

The shining figure was no phantasm, I knew when I remembered. No phantasm could have pulled my stepladder into the cylinder which was the zranthion field.

The shining figure, if asked, if it so elected, could walk out of that field and explain itself, in words,

gestures, expressions!

But as the form became more sharply etched, more material, the face became more serious. The shining figure *did* shine, with an unearthly brilliance. That shining did not make me think of the phosphorescence from dead things, from the tomb; it made me think of what the aura should be, if any such thing existed. It made me think of the shining aureole about the heads of angels. But there was a light around this figure, in the midst of which it stood.

I was going to call the figure by name, ask it to step forth from the zranthion field and explain itself to me. I knew positively that the entity represented there could answer any question about the mental screen I could ask. Why? Because, I felt sure, the figure knew all about it, used it, operated in some plane where man did not have to await the passage of aeons to possess the ability to operate the screen naturally.

On the verge of extending an invitation to the shining figure I came to a dead stop, mentally. The figure must have read my mind as surely as if I were using a mental screen—for it shook its head, almost imperceptibly! It was part and parcel of Joe X, but it was individual. Joe X did not shake the head of the shining figure, mentally; the shining figure shook its own head!

Yet there was promise in the headshake. The lips shaped words. I did not hear the words, was not *intended* to hear them, yet the thought was pictured forth in my mind *in these words*:

"Do not ask me now. It shall happen, very soon!"

Then the shining figure, giving me a smile in which I read a weird ineffable sweetness, a vast, awesome satisfaction—almost as if I were somehow bringing about an event long hoped for, endlessly deferred—vanished from the field, completely.

"Now, Joe I said, 'show me Cleopatra's needle! Grant's Tomb! The Lincoln Memorial!'"

I stopped right there. Joe X, though he had not changed, showed

me nothing after the disappearance from the screen of his shining figure. I stared at Joe X. This time he touched his ears again. He could not hear me. Soon his face took on that blank look which told me he could no longer see me. This had happened before, when something had been building up in the mental screen.

What agency was building up the force? Not Joe X's mind, not mine. I was sure, for I did not think of blocking out Joe X from normal sight and sound, and I doubted very much if it were any idea of Joe's.

For two solid hours I waited for Joe X to be in communication with me again, and it did not happen. He just sat there, motionless, as if he were solidly frozen in a cake of ice.

THUS IT was when Zack came to me, visibly disturbed, to tell me that a lady was waiting to see me in my almost-never-used reception room in the main part of my home.

"Old, Zack?" I asked softly.

"I don't know what to say sir, except that she doesn't look like the kind that aged!"

"Beautiful, Zack?"

"Mr. Lowre," he said fervently, almost reverently, "she's something out of a picture! She is the most beautiful woman I've ever seen. That's not just my idea as a man. My wife says exactly the same thing, in more and better words!"

I glanced back at Joe X. He knew nothing of what went on. I followed Zack to the sitting room. The woman rose to meet me. I went forward, took her hand. It was warm, human, gentle, perfectly formed. I scarcely know how to describe Marya Madone. You lost yourself, looking into her eyes. You couldn't think anything wrong, looking at her. Her face was exquisite. Her hair was auburn. I suppose it was combed, dressed somehow, but I'll never be able to describe it—not until the mental screen becomes natural! Yet I'll forget no slightest detail of it.

"Chester Lowre," she murmured, her voice like a far off singing breeze, "I doubt very much if you can imagine how I feel! You are

making possible a meeting I had never hoped would be possible. I am afraid. I should not be afraid, I know, but I can't help it."

She spoke English, with an accent I could not place. I knew, at the same time, that no philologist, however experienced, could place it, either, for the very best of reasons: this woman's native tongue was unknown to philologists! But that's getting ahead of the experiment.

"You are the mother of Carse Ryal Smith," I said, making it a statement rather than a question. She did not bother to answer. She knew that I knew.

"I told you we should meet again!" she smiled, a smile that would go with me through eternity.

"Should Carse recognize you at once both as his mother and the 'shining figure' of his experiences, Marya Madone?"

"No! No!" she said. "It would never do! It must be done gradually. I shall be Marya Madone with which his shining figure gradually and naturally merges!"

"Then you must change more," I said. "Right now the resemblance is too close for him to miss! You answered one of my ads, of course—quite aside from your appearance, your warning, and your mental promise out of the zranthion field?"

She laughed softly. "I started the instant you made up your mind to advertise! I was enroute the moment after you put your ad into words. There will be many answers to it, but it won't matter."

"So!" I said ruefully. "All that money went to waste, including the hundred dollars I got from Carse Ryal?"

"Nothing good ever goes to waste," she said seriously, "and have you forgotten something about money, with reference to my son?"

"His store of it never diminishes!" I said. "You keep him supplied!"

"A mother's privilege, but he must never know it."

"I promise," I said, "but there is something I must ask...."

"About the father of the triplets?"

she smiled, unruffled. "He has been dead fifteen hundred years. Here and now, and during the time you have lived, he would have to wait fifteen thousand years to be born!"

"Has he lived at all during the life of Carse Ryal?" I asked gently.

"No," she said, "but Carse is still not that which he has all his life feared! It was necessary that he believe, or at least suspect, that he was born out of wedlock. His thoughts must turn inward to make this experiment not only possible but useful! In spite of records to the contrary, in that orphanage, Carse Ryal Smith was legitimately born! But you already knew this, Chester Lowre!"

"I thought I knew, Marya Madone, but knowing and proving are two different things! Now I shall prove! And your other two sons, Marya?"

"Do you not know that also, Chester Lowre?" she asked, grinning as if vastly pleased with herself.

I told her what I thought and believed.

"Of course," she said, "what else could it possibly be? Now, if I can change, somehow...."

"I'll fix it," I promised. I called Zack's wife. "This is Mrs. Madone," I told her. "She is going to help Mr. Smith and me in our laboratory work. Will you fix her up in the ordinary costume of a nurse?"

I could think of nothing more different from Marya Madone's excellent, neatly fitting cloth of gold garment than the rustling white of a nurse's costume, starched as I knew Zack's wife would starch it.

"There should be a touch of rouge and of lipstick," I added to Marya Madone. "It's customary."

She needed neither one, except to hide her own natural exquisite complexion by way of additional disguise.

In less than an hour I conducted nurse Madone into the laboratory. It was almost impossible for me to grasp the fact that in this competent looking nurse, clearly interested only in her work, was two other people: Joe X's mother, and his "shining figure!"

How could that be, *scientifically*?

It was, though, and I knew I should, with her help, and Joe X's, prove it to the hilt!

CHAPTER VII

AGAIN THE MARBLES

MARYA MADONE sat across the table from me. Between us was the tray. In the pockets of the tray were the three black balls. Marya Madone watched me, but not until she had looked long at the still figure in the easy chair inside the zranthon field. Such love for Joe X looked out of her eyes as I could not remember seeing in any other woman's face, ever.

Marya's love for her son was limitless.

I remembered what he had said to me, that if he could he would kill her; she represented the *blackest* moments in his life.

"When the tray and the balls become as white as your light," I said to nurse Madone, "the experiment will be completed, is that so?"

"Yes," she said softly, "and then...."

"Then I shall lose you and Joe X as I have lost Baird and Partosi!"

"Nothing once possessed is ever entirely lost," she said, "and you may see us again, somewhere in time. But during your life you will see us no more—after the tray and the balls are completely *light*!"

"Are you going to explain it all to me?"

"That I am not authorized to do!" she said. "It is not given man to know the future by abnormal means. But if you read the signs given you, and interpret them yourself, I can agree or disagree without violating the universal law."

"Then I shall begin with you," I said, "since all life begins with the mother! It is true that, according to time as it is known by me and my contemporaries, *you will not be born for fifteen thousand years yet!* According to your reckoning, there is no time!"

Her smile was radiant. She said nothing. But the smile was above all encouraging, triumphant. I had spoken truly.

"The black tray," I went on, "represents you. It is the mother, as if the three pockets were the womb. The three black spheres represent Joe X and his two brothers, of whom I do not yet know for certain, though I feel reasonably sure that, when they're not acting, they don't in the least resemble yellow-robed Tibetans!"

Marya Madone threw back her head and laughed aloud, a musical expression that was more like an embrace than an embrace is.

"Carse Ryal was very close then," she said, "but the time was not ripe that he should know the truth! Go on, Chester Lowre. It is desired that you have the fullest enjoyment from this experiment."

"The secret of what is happening here and now, including you, Marya Madone," I said, "is partially contained in Joe X's 'lapses.' His most amazing 'lapse' was one of time—fifteen thousand years of time."

"Not quite correct," she said. "You can proceed no further until you have corrected your formula."

"I don't believe in reincarnation," I stated flatly.

"It doesn't matter whether you do," she said, "as long as you have the true scientific perspective on time!"

"That, actually, time is an invention of modern man, who thus limits himself? If that were true, Marya Madone, man always lives...."

"That of which he is composed," she said quickly, "always has been, is, always will be. He is eternal, on the basis of your own scientific thesis that no energy is ever lost. Man is a manifestation of energy."

Her intriguing accent made me pause for a moment. It also had to be explained.

"Up there in the future," I said, "English has been a dead language for countless generations, but nothing that has ever been, ever dies. Even languages do not die, though they are buried in human subcon-

scious, as if they were! The perceptive, a Marya Madone, can regain any 'lost' language she needs!"

She was delighted at this explanation for her knowledge of English and her accent. I was pleased with myself. Now and again Nurse Madone looked at the silent, motionless figure of Joe X, her love seeming more each time she looked.

I WONDERED if the love did it, or the thoughts of Marya Madone, or of whoever had helped her get back here in time—but the tray and the black balls were slowly fading!

"You were expecting a child," I went on, "twenty-five years ago!"

"Fourteen thousand nine hundred and seventy-five years in the future from now!" she corrected me. "Also, you have forgotten something of vast importance!"

"You were expecting three children, triplets! You were somehow connected with a scientist, an inventor, a man or woman whose curiosity probed beyond time and space...." I was fumbling, watching her face, trying to read whether I was "hot" or "cold."

Then I took the plunge, "It wouldn't have been your husband, would it, the father of the triplets?"

"It would, indeed," she said softly, "and I only thank whatever powers there be that you have solved the problem this far. But there is still far to go."

"In that far-off future day, which to you even now is," I went on, "man is endowed at birth with the ability to think-forth, to show the picture of his thoughts to whomever he wishes."

"True," she said. "But not exactly the truth. I shall hate it if you are disappointed when you know the truth of the next step!"

"Don't tell me your husband is the real inventor of the zranthon-ray tube!"

Quickly she put forth her hand to touch mine. I hoped she would never take the hand away.

"Do not feel disappointed, Chester

Lowre!" she said. "After all, you took it from him, brought it here!"

"The whole thing, the birth of Joe X here was an accident!" I said. "Your husband...."

"Ryal Madone," she said, as if she were presenting me.

"Ryal Madone was working on his zranthon-ray tube, conceiving it a possible channel by which time might be investigated in both directions, past and future! At the same time he was much concerned about the health of his wife! Working with the zranthon tube he decided on a spot in time, fifteen thousand years in the past, at the same time as he thought of his wife, and her health...."

Her face was serious, but it was telling me to go on, go on....

"He visioned the past, *my time*, even as he pictured the beauty of his beloved wife and was heart-deep concerned about her. It was no intention of Ryal Madone that he actually hurl his wife back into the past, so that her children be born in *my time*. But that's what happened! Then, though he could restore his wife to his time, he could not restore his children! He lost them in time. He has been trying since then to restore the family completely!"

"And now, thanks to you," she said, "it is coming to pass!"

I was so eager and excited it was easy to miss something important, and I knew it, intended to do nothing of the sort.

"But the brothers of Joe X," I said. "Joe never knew them or about them. Is he the eldest, youngest, middle child? Oldest! You were restored to your proper time immediately after Joe X was born—and left on the steps of the orphanage out West! So Joe X lost brothers, mother, father, all at the same moment! No wonder he felt lost indeed!"

"But we did not lose him!" said Marya Madone. "We were in touch. Using the zranthon tube...."

"Your husband thought you forth whenever your son was in danger of dying!" I ejaculated. "You mani-

fested as a man, knowing his hatred of the mother who had deserted him!"

Now her face was very sad. She glanced again at Joe X, showering him with love. The black balls were definitely lighter now!

"By inventing the zranthon ray in my time," I said, "I began preparing the channel of reunion...."

"You must go back further!" she hinted. "Back to...."

SOMETHING seemed to silence her. I tried to guess. Then I tried to work it out mathematically. I already had enough hints about that, that was certain—the black triangles, the big one, the three smaller ones.

"Carse Ryal's attempts to kill himself," I went on, "and his narrow escapes from death, were subconscious searches for the way to reunion with his lost family. He swallowed scores of aspirin tablets, hoping he would waken in the bosom of his family. But it wasn't possible that way. There had to be a *scientific* way; there was actually no esoteric one. You had to appear to so inform him...."

"And waken the women at the orphanage," smiled Marya Madone, "so they would pump out the stomach of my very sick son!"

"Later on, still seeking a channel," I continued, "he hanged himself. But how could you cut him down, since you were not material?"

"Have you so little faith in your zranthon tube, which you had not yet invented, twenty-five years ago?" she asked, laughing a little. "I was as material, stepping out of Ryal Madone's zranthon tube, as I am now, and I have touched your hand, so you know. I touch it again, to reassure you!"

It seemed a little clearer after that.

"All you did when he should have drowned," I said, "was tell him to keep on swimming. But I'm afraid I can't see how he escaped from certain death when his plane crashed over Tibet!"

"And it is really the most signifi-

cant part of the experiment!" she hinted. "It leads to the other things, right up to the...."

"Me and the zranthon tube!" I said. "He came through because he had one, the *first*, of his 'lapses'! Actually he wasn't even *in* that plane when it crashed! He just thought he was! But no, that's not possible. Nobody can make me believe...."

"He came straight to your door with a blind ad in his hand, remember?" said Marya softly. "You believe *that*, don't you?"

"Are you trying to tell me that your husband's zranthon tube and mine are working in cahoots?" I asked.

She did not answer. She could not, or for some reason would not, tell me.

"I can believe it, I guess," I said slowly, "but if you try to make me believe that his zranthon tube and mine are one and the same...."

I had to drop it there myself, my heart almost stopped beating. I knew by her face that the tube which I had so proudly invented was actually not mine—but belonged to Ryal Madone, ages up there in the future. He had worked out, with my accidental help, something unusual in the time machine.

At this moment I had an eerie demonstration of *something*. Beginning to perspire, I got out my handkerchief, or started to. Instead I came out with my wallet. On a hunch I opened it. Marya Madone began to laugh when I drew forth, of all things, the five worn twenty dollar bills, *the same ones*, I had left at the telegraph office to pay in part for ads sent by wire.

"It's one of the threads," she said softly. "Nothing can be left out or the experiment is a failure."

At that moment Zack Hyde brought a telegraph messenger. It appeared that several newspapers had refused to accept the ad, and exactly one hundred dollars was being returned to me. It was "herewith", the message said. By an odd "coincidence" the total was one hundred dollars. The messenger boy looked scared to death when, fum-

bling in his pockets, he could not find the money! I could not tell him it had preceded him. When I showed it to him, however, he went away, shaking his head.

"It's not counterfeit, either," said Marya Madone, using words Joe X had already used to explain the fact that he was never broke. I realized that his replenishment of funds always came about, seemingly, in some perfectly normal, business-like manner.

"Formulas for the comprehension of time and space are always mathematical," I mused. "That's what the code of the triangles was telling me. The tray is the mother. The spheres are the three trins. I know it, but how I know it I am not sure. Marya, this is not the Pythagorean Theorem, which states that the square of the hypotenuse of a right triangle..."

"None of the four triangles is a right triangle!" said Marya Madone at once. "Yet you are closer to the truth even than Euclid was. I can help you no further!"

"The union of the male and female elements," I fumbled again, "which brings about conception of a third entity which may be either male or female. This is the metaphysical symbolism of the Forty Seventh Problem of Euclid! That's why the triangles have been used...."

I CAUGHT my breath as realization came. Marya Madone was facing me squarely. I could not escape the profound intelligence of her eyes. I noted the high white purity of her forehead. Instantly my mind fixed on a point exactly in the center of her forehead, and drew two lines from it, slanting to right and left so as to miss the deep expressive eyes. They were two sides of a triangle. I ended them, mentally drew a third below the eyes—and I had the large triangle in the tray, with two of the "marbles" represented by the eyes of Marya Madone! The third would also have been present in the spot of origin, in the center of the forehead, if I, as a scientist, could have accepted the idea of "soul" or "spirit", which esotericists

say is located behind the skull at exactly that spot.

I refused to speculate on it. I could "see" the symbolism of the triangles, and that was enough for me.

"By the raised triangles on the balls, then," I said to Marya Madone, "your husband and I have been in communication!"

"Not exactly!" she corrected me. "With them he *sought* to communicate with his children!"

"Baird and Partos!" I exploded. "The two Tibetans of the yellow-robes, in a silent courtyard in Shanghai!"

"Chester Lowre," she said softly, "I am more pleased with you than I shall be allowed to tell you. You have almost reached the climax, and the answer, of your experiment in building, synthetically, the mental screen of the distant future! One thing remains."

"Yes," I agreed, "it is this: where does the operation in Shanghai, the brain substitution, fit in? Of course, like the tray, the triangles, and all the rest, it could be symbolism. But I saw the marks of the trephining myself!"

"So many human beings, even in *my time*," she said softly, "have to see to believe. Carse Ryal's brothers actually operated on Carse Ryal—a drastic effort to make him take his mind off those moods of depression which made him think of suicide. If he had ever succeeded we should have lost him entirely. Also, my other sons altered his brain in order to exercise some control over his 'lapses.' They also gave him the idea of returning to the United States."

"And through all of this what have I been?" I demanded. "Just a stooge? Have I been operating solely under direction from your husband?"

She hesitated a long time before she answered that one.

"Yes," she said, "but *please* don't feel too badly about it! The reason is inescapable. I may be allowed to tell you, *somehow*, at the end!"

"Well, then," I said somewhat grumpily, "two things remain! Producing Baird and Partos, and recon-

ciling you and your trin son, Carse Ryal. But Marya, I just remembered something: identical triplets would not have different colored hair. Partos is a redhead!"

"And I," said Marya, "thanks to your Hattie Hyde, *am a nurse!* Really, Chester sometimes even I find you exasperating!"

"Where are Partos and Baird?" I asked.

"You must work out your own experiment," said Marya Madone.

"I think, absurd as it may sound, that they are merged with Joe X!"

"What's so absurd about it?" asked Marya Madone crisply.

CHAPTER VIII

IRREPARABLE LOSS?

NO, THERE was nothing absurd or unscientific about the merging of the three brothers. Baird and Partos were thought forms, thought forth from the far future by Ryal Madone in a desperate effort to reunite them with Carse Ryal Smith, first step to a complete family reunion.

I realized now that Carse Ryal Smith himself was a thought form which had stepped out of the zranthon-ray mental screen twenty-five years before—from what to me was the distant future; that very same future I was trying to make available to my time by invention of the mental screen, by using the zranthon tube.

But if Ryal Madone had invented it, far up yonder, well, no wonder Carse Ryal Smith knew so much about it. And since his origin was far in the future, what secrets could the earth of my time possibly have withheld from him? He hadn't known of his parents or his brothers simply because they were not of *this time*.

Now Marya Madone, a strange mixture of sadness and excitement in her face, removed the balls from the tray. They had become, all of them, almost *white*. Was white *really* for purity? Did the whiteness mean that Joe X's mother no longer reminded him of his *blackest*

moments and moods?

Marya Madone placed the white balls on the table between us. She handled them as one long accustomed. They rolled this time not to form the big triangle, but close together, as if snuggling.

Marya held the white tray close to her breast for a moment, her eyes closed almost as if she prayed. Then she moved to the zranthon-ray field, offered the tray to the field at approximately the same place and height as I had brought it forth when it had been black. The field received it, took it inward!

The white tray stood there, several feet above the floor of my laboratory. Marya Madone studied it.

"What follows," she said, "is not compulsory on my part or that of my sons. But you have had so much to do with this reunion that the family is grateful beyond words. Therefore he wishes you to *know!* It wishes you to know *all!*"

The white tray began to dim, to diffuse, apparently to mingle with all the zranthon field. But the change, the transmutation, whatever it was, was speedy. First, faces and heads began to appear, grinning—the faces of Baird and Partos, *both heads with black hair!* I looked at Joe X. On his face was an expression of ineffable content.

Marya Madone stared at Joe X. "He already knows and accepts me, Chester!" she murmured.

Somehow, perhaps with the help of his brothers, perhaps with the help of his "shining figure", or the help of his far-off-future father, Joe X had been kept abreast of our conversations since the arrival of Marya.

Baird stepped out of the zranthon field, moved to his mother, took her hands, dropped to one knee:

"Mother!" he murmured. Then he turned to me. "It's the same word in our language!" he said.

Now came Partos, to kneel beside his brother. Even so, the eyes of Marya Madone were fixed on Joe X, who now rose from the easy chair, pushed the armrest, the zranthon tube, away determinedly, walked to

(Please turn to page 127)

THE CATAAAA by A. E. VAN VOGT

A Little Classic By One Of The Most Brilliant Science-Fiction Writers Of Our Day.

Several years ago this startling story appeared in a Los Angeles publication, *FANTASY BOOK*, and it immediately created a furor among the local stiff faithful. With the resumption of *MARVEL*, we thought it should be brought to a larger audience, particularly since its author has meantime won recognition as one of America's most brilliant science-fiction writers. We think you'll agree that "The Cataaaa" is a masterpiece.



The cat turned and touched Silky's face gently.

THE USUAL group was gathering in the bar. Cathy was already pretending she was far gone. Ted was busy putting on his stupid look. Myra giggled three times the way a musician tunes his instrument for the evening. Jones was talking to Gord in his positive

fashion. Gord said "Glub!" every few seconds, just as if he was listening. And Morton tried to draw attention to himself by remaining aloof and intellectual looking far down in his chair.

No one noticed the slight, slim man sitting on a stool before the bar. The man kept glancing at the group; but just when he joined them, or who invited him, no one had any clear idea. Nor did it occur to anyone to

tell him to go away.

The stranger said, "You were talking about the basic characteristics of human nature—"

Myra giggled, "Is that what we were talking about? I wondered."

The laughter that followed did not deter the newcomer.

"It so happens that I have had an experience which illustrates the point. It began one day when I was glancing through the newspaper, and I ran across a circus advertisement..."

At the top of the ad (he went on) was a large question mark followed by some equally large exclamation marks. Then:

WHAT IS IT?

IT'S THE CAT

COME AND SEE THE CAT
THE CAT WILL STARTLE YOU
THE CAT WILL AMAZE YOU
SEE THE CAT AT THE CIRCUS
FREAK SHOW

In smaller letters at the bottom of the ad was the information that the cat was being "shown under the personal direction of Silkey Travis."

Until that point I had been reading with a vague interest and curiosity. The name made me jump.

"Good lord!" I thought. "It's him. It's Silkey Travis on that card."

I hurried to my desk, and took out a card that had come in the mail two days before. At the time it had made no sense to me at all. The words written on the back in a fine script seemed pure gibberish, and the photograph on the front, though familiar, unlocked no real memory. It was of a man with a haunted look on his face, sitting in a small cage. I now recognized it as being a likeness of Silkey Travis, not as I had known him fifteen or so years before, but plumper, older, as he would be now.

I returned to my chair, and sat musing about the past.

Even in those days, his name had fitted Silkey Travis. At high school he organized the bathing beauty contest, and gave the first prize to his cousin and the second prize to the girl who was the teacher's pet of most of the teachers. The students' science exhibition, a collection of local

lizards, snakes, insects and a few Indian artifacts was an annual affair, which brought a turnout of admiring parents. Invariably, it was Silkey who organized it. Plays, holiday shows and other paraphernalia of school pastimes felt the weight of his guiding hand and circus spirit.

After graduating from high school, I went on to State college to major in biology, and I lost sight of Silkey for seven years. Then I saw an item in one of the papers to the effect that local boy Silkey Travis was doing well in the big town, having just purchased a "piece" of a vaudeville show, and that he also owned a "piece" in a beach concession in New Jersey.

Again, there was silence. And now, here he was, no doubt "piece" owner of the circus freak show.

Having solved the mystery of the postcard, so it seemed to me, I felt amused and tolerant. I wondered if Silkey had sent the card to all his former school companions. I decided not to puzzle any more about the meaning of the words written on the back. The scheme behind them was all too obvious.

Sitting there, I had absolutely no intention of going to the circus. I went to bed at my usual hour, and woke up with a start some hours later to realize that I was not alone. The sensations that came to me as I lay there have been described by Johnson in his book on morbid fears.

I lived in a quiet neighborhood, and the silence was intense. Presently, I could hear the labored pounding of my heart. Poisons surged into my stomach; gas formed and leaked up to my mouth bringing a bitter taste. I had to fight to keep my breath steady.

And still I could see nothing. The dark fears ran their courses, and the first thought came that I must have had a nightmare. I began to feel ashamed of myself. I mumbled:

"Who's there?"

No answer.

I climbed out of bed, and turned on the light. The room was empty. But still I wasn't satisfied. I went out into the hall, then I examined the clothes closet and bathroom.

Finally, dissatisfied, I tested the window fastenings—and it was there I received my shock. Painted on the outer side of the pane of one of the windows were the letters:

"The cat requests that you come to the circus."

I went back to bed so furious that I thought of having Silkey arrested. When I woke up in the morning the sign was gone from the window.

BY THE TIME breakfast was over, my temper of the night had cooled. I was even able to feel a pitying amusement at the desperate desire of Silkey to let his old acquaintances know what a big shot he was. Before starting off to my morning classes at State, I looked under my bedroom window. I found what looked like footprints, but they were not human, so I decided that Silkey must have taken care to leave no tracks of his own.

At class, just before noon, one of the students asked me whether there was any good explanation in biological science for freaks. I gave the usual explanation of variabilities, nutritional deficiencies, diseases, frustration of brain development affecting the shape of the body, and so on. I finished drily that for further information I would direct him to my old friend, Silkey Travis, director of freaks at the Pagley-Matterson circus.

The offhand remark caused a sensation. I was informed that a freak at this circus had prompted the original question. "A strange, cat-like creature," the student said in a hushed voice, "that examines you with the same interest that you examine it."

The bell rang at that moment, and I was spared the necessity of making a comment. I remember thinking, however, that people hadn't changed much. They were still primarily interested in eccentricity whereas, as a scientist, the processes of normalcy seemed to me far more fascinating.

I still had no intention of going to the circus. But on the way home that afternoon I put my hand in my breast pocket, and drew out the post-

card with the photograph of Silkey on the front. I turned it over absently, and read again the message that was on it:

"The interspatial problem of delivering mail involves enormous energy problems, which effect time differentials. Accordingly, it is possible that this card will arrive before I know who you are. As a precaution I am sending another one to the circus with your name and address on it, and the two cards will go out together.

"Do not worry too much about the method of delivery. I simply put an instrument into a mail box. This precipitates the cards into the box on earth, and they will then be picked up and delivered in the usual fashion. The precipitator then dissolves.

"The photograph speaks for itself."

It didn't. Which is what began to irritate me again. I jammed the card back into my pocket, half-minded to phone up Silkey and ask him what the silly thing meant, if anything. I refrained, of course. It wasn't important enough.

When I got out of bed the next morning, the words, "The cat wants to talk to you!" were scrawled on the outside of the same window pane. They must have been there a long time. Because, even as I stared at them, they began to fade. By the time I finished breakfast they were gone.

I was disturbed now rather than angry. Such persistence on Silkey's part indicated neurotic overtones in his character. It was possible that I ought to go to his show, and so give him the petty victory that would lay his ghost, which had now haunted me two nights running. However, it was not till after lunch that a thought occurred to me that suddenly clinched my intention. I remembered Virginia.

For two years I had been professor of biology at State. It was an early ambition which, now that I had realized it, left me at a loose end for the first time in my life. Accordingly, for the first time in my

rather drab existence the mating urge was upon me. Virginia was the girl, and, unfortunately, she regarded me as a cross between a fossil and a precision brain. I felt sure that the idea of marrying me had not yet occurred to her.

For some time it had seemed to me that if I could only convince her, without loss of dignity, that I was a romantic fellow she might be fooled into saying yes. What better method than to pretend that I still got excited over circuses, and, as a grand climax to the evening I would take her in to see Silkey Travis, and hope that my acquaintance with such a character would thrill her exotic soul.

The first hurdle was bridged when I called her up, and she agreed to go to the circus with me. I put the best possible face on for the preliminaries, riding the ferris wheel and such juvenilia. But the moment of the evening for me came when I suggested that we go and see the freaks being shown by my old friend, Silkey Travis.

It really went over. Virginia stopped and looked at me almost accusingly.

"Philip," she said, "you're not trying to pretend that you know a person called Silkey? She drew a deep breath. "That I have to see."

Silkey came through beautifully. He was not in when we entered, but the ticket taker called into some rear compartment. And a minute later Silkey came charging into the main freak tent. He was plump with the plumpness of a well fed shark. His eyes were narrowed as if he had spent the past fifteen years calculating the best methods of using other people for his own advantage. He had none of the haunted look of the photograph, but there were ghosts in his face. Ghosts of greed and easy vices, ghosts of sharp dealing and ruthlessness. He was all that I had hoped for, and, best of all, he was pathetically glad to see me. His joy had the special quality of the lonely nomad who is at last looking longingly at the settled side of life. We both overdid the greeting a little, but we were about equal-

ly pleased at each other's enthusiasm. The hellos and introductions over, Silkey grew condescending.

"Brick was in a while ago. Said you were teaching at State. Congrats. Always knew you had it in you."

I passed over that as quickly as possible. "How about showing us around, Silkey, and telling us about yourself?"

WE HAD already seen the fat woman and the human skeleton, but Silkey took us back and told us *his* life history with them. How he had found them, and helped them to their present fame. He was a little verbose, so on occasion I had to hurry him along. But finally we came to a small tent within the tent, over the closed canvas entrance of which was painted simply, "THE CAT". I had noticed it before, and the chatter of the barker who stood in front of it had already roused my curiosity:

"The cat...come in and see the cat. Folks, this is no ordinary event, but the thrill of a lifetime. Never before has such an animal as this been seen in a circus. A biological phenomenon that has amazed scientists all over the country... Folks, this is special. Tickets are twenty-five cents, but if you're not satisfied you can get your money back. That's right. That's what I said. You get your money back merely by stepping up and asking for it..."

And so on. However, his ballyhoo was not the most enticing angle. What began to titillate my nerves was the reaction of the people who went inside. They were allowed to enter in groups, and there must have been a guide inside, because his barely audible voice would mumble on for some minutes, and then it would rise to a hearable level, as he said, "And now, folks, I will draw aside the curtain and show you—the cat!"

The curtain must have been pulled with a single jerk, on a carefully timed basis. For the word, cat was scarcely out of his mouth, when the audience reaction would sound:

"Aaaaaa!"

Distinct, unmistakable exhalation

of the breaths of a dozen startled people. There would follow an uncomfortable silence. Then, slowly the people would emerge and hurry to the outer exit. Not one, that I was aware of, asked for his money back.

There was a little embarrassment at the gate. Silkey started to mumble something about only owning part of the show, so he couldn't give passes. But I ended that by quickly purchasing the necessary tickets, and we went inside with the next group.

The animal that sat in an arm-chair on the dais was about five feet long and quite slender. It had a cat's head and vestiges of fur. It looked like an exaggerated version of the walkey-talky animals in comic books.

At that point resemblance to normalcy ended.

It was alien. It was not a cat at all. I recognized that instantly. The structure was all wrong. It took me a moment to identify the radical variations.

The head! High foreheaded it was, and not low and receding. The face was smooth and almost hairless. It had character and strength, and intelligence. The body was well balanced on long, straight legs. The arms were smooth, ending in short but unmistakable fingers, surmounted by thin, sharp claws.

But it was the eyes that were really different. They looked normal enough, slightly slanted, properly lidded, about the same size as the eyes of human beings. *But they danced.* They shifted twice, even three times as swiftly as human eyes. Their balanced movement at such a high speed indicated vision that could read photographically reduced print across a room. What sharp, what incredibly sharp images that brain must see.

All this I saw within the space of a few seconds. Then the creature moved.

It stood up, not hurriedly, but casually, easily, and yawned and stretched. Finally, it took a step forward. Brief panic ensued among the

women in the audience, that ended as the guide said quietly:

"It's all right, folks. He frequently comes down and looks us over. He's harmless."

The crowd stood its ground, as the cat came down the steps from the dais and approached me. The animal paused in front of me, and peered at me curiously. Then it reached gingerly forward, opened my coat, and examined the inside breast pocket.

It came up holding the postcard with the picture of Silkey on it. I had brought it along, intending to ask Silkey about it.

For a long moment the cat examined the card, and then it held it out to Silkey. Silkey looked at me.

"Okay?" he said.

I nodded. I had a feeling that I was witnessing a drama the motivations of which I did not understand. I realized that I was watching Silkey intently.

He looked at the picture on the card, and then started to hand it to me. Then he stopped. Jerkily, he pulled the card back, and stared at the photograph.

"For cripes sake," he gasped. "It's a picture of me."

There was no doubt about his surprise. It was so genuine that it startled me. I said:

"Didn't you send that to me? Didn't you write what's on the back there?"

Silkey did not answer immediately. He turned the card over and glared down at the writing. He began to shake his head.

"Doesn't make sense," he muttered. "Hmmm, it was mailed in Marstown. That's where we were three days last week."

He handed it back to me. "Never saw it before in my life. Funny."

His denial was convincing. I held the card in my hand, and looked questioningly at the cat. But it had already lost interest. As we stood there, watching, it turned and climbed back up to the dais, and slumped into a chair. It yawned. It closed its eyes.

And that's all that happened. We all left the tent, and Virginia and

I said goodbye to Silkey. Later, on our way home, the episode seemed even more meaningless than when it had happened.

I don't know how long I had been asleep before I awakened. I turned over intending to go right back to sleep. And then I saw that my bedside light was burning. I sat up with a start.

The cat was sitting in a chair beside the bed, not more than three feet away.

THERE WAS silence. I couldn't have spoken at the beginning. Slowly, I sat up. Memory came of what the guide at the show had said... "Harmless!" But I didn't believe that anymore.

Three times now this beast had come here, twice to leave messages. I let my mind run over those messages, and I quailed "...The cat wants to talk to you!" Was it possible that this thing could talk.

The very inactivity of the animal finally gave me courage. I licked my lips and said:

"Can you talk?"

The cat stirred. It raised an arm in the unhurried fashion of somebody who does not want to cause alarm. It pointed at the night table beside my bed. I followed the pointing finger and saw that an instrument was standing under the lamp. The instrument spoke at me:

"I cannot emit human sounds with my own body, but as you can hear this is an excellent intermediary."

I have to confess that I jumped, that my mind scurried into a deep corner of my head—and only slowly came out again as the silence continued, and no attempt was made to harm me. I don't know why I should have assumed that its ability to speak through a mechanical device was a threat to me. But I had.

I suppose it was really a mental shrinking, my mind unwilling to accept the reality that was here. Before I could think clearly, the instrument on the table said:

"The problem of conveying thoughts through an electronic device depends on rhythmic utilization of brain energies."

The statement stirred me. I had read considerable on that subject, beginning with Professor Hans Berger's report on brain rhythms in 1929. The cat's statements didn't quite fit.

"Isn't the energy potential too small?" I asked. "And besides you have your eyes open. The rhythms are always interfered with when the eyes are open, and in fact such a large part of the cortex yields to the visual centers that no rhythm whatever is detectable at such times."

It didn't strike me then, but I think now that I actually distracted the animal from its purpose. "What measurements have been taken?" it asked. Even through the mind radio, it sounded interested.

"Photoelectric cells," I said, "have measured as much (or as little, which is really more accurate) as 50 microvolts of energy, mostly in the active regions of the brain. Do you know what a microvolt is?"

The creature nodded. It said after a moment, "I won't tell you what energy my brain develops. It would probably frighten you, but it isn't all intelligence. I am a student on a tour of the galaxy, what might be called a post-graduate tour. Now, we have certain rules—" It stopped. "You opened your mouth. Did you wish to say something?"

I felt dumb, overwhelmed. Then, weakly, "You said galaxy."

"That is correct."

"B-but wouldn't that take years?" My brain was reaching out, striving to grasp, to understand.

"My tour will last about a thousand of your years," said the cat.

"You're immortal?"

"Oh, no."

"But—"

There I stopped. I couldn't go on. I sat there, blank-brained, while the creature went on:

"The rules of the fraternity of students require that we tell one person about ourselves before we leave the planet. And that we take with us a symbolical souvenir of the civilization of the beings on it. I'm curious to know what you would suggest as a souvenir of earth. It can be

anything, so long as it tells at a glance the dominating character of the race."

The question calmed me. My brain stopped its alternation of mad whirling followed by blankness. I began to feel distinctly better. I shifted myself into a more comfortable position and stroked my jaw thoughtfully. I sincerely hoped that I was giving the impression that I was an intelligent person whose opinion would be worthwhile.

A sense of incredible complication began to seize on me. I had realized it before, but now, with an actual decision to make, it seemed to me that human beings were really immensely intricate creatures. How could anybody pick one facet of their nature, and say, "This is man!" Or "This represents man!" I said slowly:

"A work of art, science, or any useful article—you include those?"

"Anything."

My interest was now at its peak. My whole being accepted the wonderfulness of what had happened. It seemed tremendously important that the great race that could travel the breadth and length of the galaxy should have some true representation of man's civilization. It amazed me, when I finally thought of the answer, that it had taken me so long. But the moment it occurred to me, I knew I had it.

"Man," I said, "is primarily a religious animal. From times too remote to be a written record, he has needed a faith in something. Once, he believed almost entirely in animate gods like rivers, storms, plants, then his gods became invisible; now they are once more becoming animate. An economic system, science—whatever it will be, the dominating article of it will be that he worships it without regard to reason, in other words in a purely religious fashion.

I finished with a quiet satisfaction, "All you need is an image of a man in a durable metal, his head tilted back, his arms raised to the sky, a rapt expression on his face, and written on the base of the inscription, 'I believe'."

I saw that the creature was star-

ing at me. "Very interesting," it said at last. "I think you are very close to it, but you haven't quite got the answer."

It stood up. "But now I want you to come with me."

"Eh?"

"Dress, please."

It was unemotionally said. The fear that had been held deep inside me for minutes came back like a fire that had reached a new cycle of energy.

I DROVE MY car. The cat sat beside me. The night was cool and refreshing, but dark. A fraction of a moon peered out occasionally from scurrying clouds, and there were glimpses of star filtered dark blue sky. The realization that, from somewhere up there, this creature had come down to our earth dimmed my tenseness. I ventured:

"Your people—have they progressed much further than we to the innermost meaning of truth?"

It sounded drab and precise, a pedagogical rather than a vitally alive question. I added quickly:

"I hope you won't mind answering a few questions."

Again it sounded inadequate. It seemed to me in an abrupt agony of despair that I was muffing the opportunity of the centuries. Silently, I cursed my professional training that made my every word sound as dry as dust.

"That card," I said. "You sent that?"

"Yes." The machine on the cat's lap spoke quietly but clearly.

"How did you know my address and my name?"

"I didn't."

Before I could say anything, the cat went on, "You will understand all that before the night's over."

"Oh!" The words held me for a second. I could feel the tightness crawling into my stomach. I had been trying not to think of what was going to happen before this night was over. "...Questions?" I croaked. "Will you answer them?"

I parted my lips to start a machine gun patter of queries. And then, I closed them again. *What did I want*

to know? The vast implications of that reply throttled my voice. Why, oh, why, are human beings so emotional at the great moments of their lives? I couldn't think, for what seemed an endless time. And when I finally spoke again, my first question was trite and not at all what I intended. I said:

"You came in a spaceship?"

The cat looked at me thoughtfully. "No," it replied slowly. "I use the energy in my brain."

"Eh! You came through space in your own body?"

"In a sense. One of these years human beings will make the initial discoveries about the rhythmic use of energy. It will be a dazzling moment for science."

"We have," I said, "already made certain discoveries about our nervous systems and rhythm."

"The end of that road," was the answer, "is control of the powers of nature. I will say no more about that."

I was silent, but only briefly. The questions were bubbling now. "Is it possible," I asked, "to develop an atomic powered spaceship?"

"Not in the way you think," said the cat. "An atomic explosion cannot be confined except when it is drawn out in a series of timed frustrations. And that is an engineering problem, and has very little to do with creative physics."

"Life," I mumbled, "where did life come from?"

"Electronic accidents occurring in a suitable environment."

I had to stop there. I couldn't help it. "Electronic accidents. What do you mean?"

"The difference between an inorganic and an organic atom is the arrangement of the internal structure. The hydrocarbon compounds being the most easily affected under certain conditions are the most common form of life. But now that you have atomic energy you will discover that life can be created from any element or compound of elements. Be careful. The hydrocarbon is a weak life structure that could be easily overwhelmed in its present state of development."

I felt a chill. I could just picture the research that would be going on in government laboratories.

"You mean," I gulped, "there are life forms that would be dangerous the moment they are created?"

"Dangerous to man," said the cat. It pointed suddenly. "Turn up that street, and then through a side entrance into the circus grounds."

I had been wondering tensely where we were going. Strangely, it was a shock to realize the truth.

A few minutes later we entered the dark, silent tent of the freaks. And I knew that the final drama of the cat on earth was about to be enacted.

A tiny light flickered in the shadows. It came nearer, and I saw that there was a man walking underneath it. It was too dark to recognize him, but the light grew stronger, and I saw that it had no source. And suddenly I recognized Silkey Travis.

He was sound asleep.

He came forward, and stood in front of the cat. He looked unnatural, forlorn, like a woman caught without her makeup on. One long, trembling look I took at him, and then I stammered:

"What are you going to do?"

The machine the cat carried did not reply immediately. The cat turned and stared at me thoughtfully, then it touched Silkey's face, gently, with one finger. Silkey's eyes opened, but he made no other reaction. I realized that one part of his consciousness had been made aware of what was happening. I whispered:

"Can he hear?"

The cat nodded.

"Can he think?"

The cat shook its head; and then it said:

"In your analysis of the basic nature of human beings, you selected a symptom only. Man is religious because of a certain characteristic. I'll give you a clue. When an alien arrives on an inhabited planet, there is usually only one way that he can pass among the intelligent beings on that planet without being recognized for what he is. When you find

that method, you have attained understanding of the fundamental character of the race."

It was hard for me to think. In the dim emptiness of the freak tent, the great silence of the circus grounds all around, what was happening seemed unnatural. I was not afraid of the cat. But there was a fear inside me, as strong as terror, as dark as night. I looked at the unmoving Silkey with all the lines of his years flabby on his face. And then I stared at the light that hovered above him. And finally I looked at the cat, and I said:

"Curiosity. You mean, man's curiosity. His interest in strange objects makes him accept them as natural when he sees them."

The cat said, "It seems incredible that you, an intelligent man, have never realized the one character of all human beings." It turned briskly, straightening. "But now, enough of this conversation. I have fulfilled the basic requirements of my domicile here. I have lived for a period without being suspected, and I have told one inhabitant that I have been here. It remains for me to send home a significant artifact of your civilization—and then I can be on my way... elsewhere."

I ventured, shakily, "Surely, the artifact isn't Silkey."

"We seldom," said the cat, "choose actual inhabitants of a planet, but when we do we give them a compensation designed to balance what we take away. In his case, virtual immortality."

I felt desperate, suddenly. Seconds only remained; and it wasn't that I had any emotion for Silkey. He stood there like a clod, and even though later he would remember, it didn't matter. It seemed to me that the cat had discovered some innate secret of human nature which I, as a biologist, must know.

"For God's sake," I said, "you haven't explained anything yet. What is this basic human characteristic. And what about the postcard you sent me. And—"

"You have all the clues." The creature started to turn away. "Your inability to comprehend is no concern

of mine. We have a code, we students, that is all."

"But what," I asked desperately. "shall I tell the world? Have you no message for humankind, something—"

The cat was looking at me again. "If you can possibly restrain yourself," it said, "don't tell anyone anything."

This time, when it moved away, it did not look back. I saw, with a start, that the mist of light above Silkey's head was expanding, growing. Brighter, vaster, it grew. It began to pulse with a gentle but unbroken rhythm. Inside its coalescing fire the cat and Silkey were dim forms, like shadows in a fire.

Abruptly, the shadows faded; and then the mist of light began to dim. Slowly, it sagged to the ground, and lay for minutes blurring into the darkness.

Of Silkey and the creature there was no sign.

THE GROUP sitting around the table in the bar was briefly silent. Finally, Gord said, "Glub!" and Jones said in a positive fashion: "You solved the problem of the postcard, of course?"

The slim, professorish man nodded. "I think so. The reference in the card to time differentials is the clue. The card was sent *after* Silkey was put on exhibition in the school museum of the cat people, but because of time variations in transmission it arrived *before* I knew Silkey would be in town."

Morton came up out of the depths of his chair. "And what about this basic human characteristic, of which religion is merely an outward expression?"

The stranger made a gesture. "Silkey, exhibiting freaks, was really exhibiting himself. Religion is self-dramatization before a god. Self-love, narcissism—in our own little way we show ourselves off...and so a strange being could come into our midst unsuspected."

Cathy hiccupped, and said, "The love interest is what I like. Did you marry Virginia? You are the profes-

(Please turn to Page 68)

WHY WE MIGHT HAVE ANOTHER WORLD WAR!

by Alden Lorraine

Author of "The Weapon Makers", A. E. Van Vogt, recently prophesied a third World War. Speaking before attendees of a Science Fiction Convention, he stated:

"We shall have another war because human beings have not yet learned to understand themselves. Notice, please, that I did not say that they haven't learned to understand others. It is themselves that they don't understand."

The internationally known author of "Slan", "The World of Null-A" (which is being translated into French) and "The Voyage of the Space Beagle", foresees that this failure to "Know Thyself!" will produce planetary disaster.

Before World War II, the late H. G. Wells predicted "East is West and West is East, today, and they're coming together with a *bang!*" History bore him out.

General Semantician van Vogt believes the two hemispheres will inevitably clash again. This time with a Brobdingnagian smash, heard not only 'round the world but reverberating to the God of War's home planet: Mars.

Producing perhaps—who knows?—*Atomigeddon!*



Starting with the next issue of MARVEL SCIENCE STORIES, letters from our readers will be a regular department. So let's have your views and observations—on MARVEL, on fantasy-fiction in general, on whatever (as long as your approach is at least pseudo-scientific!) you think should be brought to the attention of science fiction fans today—

The Editors

OVERLORD OF EARTH

CHAPTER I

KERRY KORD crouched in utter blackness, sensing rather than seeing the other eighteen men in the belly of the glider. Only Glenn Bodey, squatting at his back, strapped with him in the two-man parachute, could he definitely identify. Minutes before, the

motor of the giant tow-plane had been killed, and Kerry knew that the fleet of twenty-five gliders must be in the vicinity of the "Overlord's Throne"

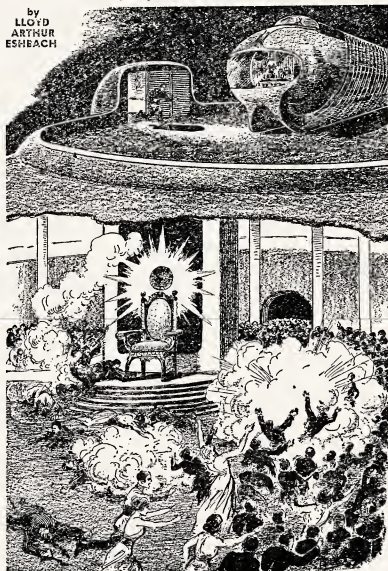
Inhaling deeply, Kerry touched the emergency chute release with his left hand and his Ghormley automatic with his right. A matter of minutes now. Despite rigid self-control, he

WHEN MAN FINALLY ACHIEVES WORLD PEACE, WHAT WILL HE DO ABOUT ANDREV?—STARTLING FEATURE-LENGTH FUTURE-SCIENCE NOVELTY!



Will men in their growing wisdom finally realize the stupidity of international slaughter and forget the so-called art of war? But when and if they do, might even then an Andrev appear—a master killer who might have discovered the secret of physical immortality and have lain in a hidden crypt for centuries, a product of an earlier, more violent day who waited patiently for the time when he would find matured mankind an easy prey for his bloodthirsty villainy?

by
**LLOYD
ARTHUR
ESHEACH**



could feel his heartbeat quicken, and a constriction high in his chest made breathing difficult. He rose to his full six-foot height; felt Bodey's broad form rising with him.

"Cold up here," the latter growled heavily. "I could do with a little heat."

"It'll be warmer shortly," Kerry commented. "*much warmer—very shortly.*"

That was how it had been since their take-off from their hidden base in the ruins of New York City—small talk—trivial complaints—leading up to indirect admission of the tension that gripped all of them.

Soon the waiting would be ended. Soon they would actually attack the stronghold of the world dictator—the self-styled "Overlord." Soon they would know whether they would live or die—whether humanity would remain enslaved or would be free.

In his mind's eye Kerry again saw the final assembly of The Remnant. Saw grim-faced, gray-clad hordes stalking through dank tunnels, littered with the silt and rubbish of decades, to meet in what had once been the terminus of a vast net of subway tubes, the heart of the transportation system of Earth's greatest metropolis. The Remnant of Earth's freemen—the comparative few of all mankind who refused to yield to Andreu, the Overlord—had chosen instead to live almost as beasts among the ruins of once mighty cities.

He saw again the close-packed, waiting thousands facing the high platform upon which had stood the Chief, Janothan Hardinger, stiffly erect in the trim, gray synthane of The Remnant, sharply visible in the beams of a battery of floodlights. Behind him had sat the Ten, the scientists, councilors and strategists of The Remnant. And all about the platform, in motionless rank upon rank, arranged with military precision, had stood five hundred men in lustreless black—Kerry Kord among them.

He heard again the final ringing words of the Chief. "We need not

die—and we *shall* not die! Men will again be free! Our plans have been made; our preparations are complete.

"You have been summoned to learn your part in our plan for freedom. What that plan is we may not say—but upon each of you and the successful completion of your individual assignment depends the liberty of humanity. Each of you will be armed. Each of you will be fitted with a uniform of the Overlord's Guard. Each of you will be assigned to a city and a man or woman in that city. And that individual must die!"

Hardinger's hand had indicated the ranks of the men in black. "Upon these men falls the greater task of the destruction of the Overlord himself. They are the pick of all The Remnant—and they shall not fail!"

"A week from today is the anniversary of man's enslavement, the Overlord's 'Liberation Day'. There will be carousing and riotous celebration, as there always has been, and when it is at its height, when midnight mantles the Himalayan peak they call the Overlord's Throne, we strike—for freedom!"

AT LAST that hour was at hand! His hour, he hoped, when he would destroy the life of the one being he truly hated. The slayer of his father, once one of the Ten, and the greatest scientist of his day.

Kerry's thoughts veered to Andreu, the Overlord, and his angular features tightened savagely. Murderer, sadist, spoiler of a civilization. Product of an earlier, more violent day who, so the tale was told, had discovered the secret of physical immortality, and had lain in a crypt for three hundred years, to awaken and enslave a world. Men in their growing wisdom had finally realized the stupidity of international slaughter and had forgotten the so-called art of war. Andreu, steeped in the foul knowledge of a century—the twentieth—redolent with wars, had found the new age easy prey. And, whether or not he was immortal, he had ruled Earth for a hundred years,

yet physically had not changed at all.

Above everything, Andreu must not escape! He would be sought out—and would be found where masses of his satellites were assembled. For the Overlord was never alone.... was afraid to be alone! Afraid, with a maddening, unbalancing fear born of his centuries in the tomb. Centuries, it was whispered, when his body had been as though dead, while his mind was alert, awake, and utterly—alone.

Minutes now—perhaps seconds—and the men from the past would be attacked by an army recruited from the pages of history. "Paratroopers" had figured in wars in Andreu's age—and "paratroopers" would destroy the head and heart of the Overlord's system! Invisible, black-clad paratroopers raining from a midnight sky....

Momentarily a red light winked over the heads of the waiting men. The signal. A rustle of synthane swished through the silence. Then a great door slid aside in the wall of the glider and a blast of frigid air whipped through the opening.

"Jump position!" Kerry barked. "Two and two. Remember your instructions." He was talking to fill in the gap before the actual leap into the dark. "We'll try to land on the flying field in front of the Star Tower. If we miss it, we get there as fast as we can. We join the wedge that blasts its way into the Tower—then, unless Andreu is blasted in the first assault—and if intelligence knows anything, he won't be. For he'll run at the first sign of trouble—we hit for the top of the Tower, blasting everyone before us."

Kerry's words came faster. Time was running out. "If I get mine, Bodey takes over. If he goes, Gill is in command. If Gill goes—you know the order. Only—get—through!"

Again that flash of red! And the first pair of men leaped into the night—a night now aglow with the light that rose from the Overlord's citadel. On the heels of the first, the second pair—the third—split

seconds between jumps, the cords attached to the rod overhead automatically opening the 'chutes. ...Kerry and Bodey took their place in the line, the last to jump save the pilot who would abandon the glider and follow....

With a rush of thin, icy air, Kerry and his partner plummeted toward the Himalayan plateau far below. Automatically Kerry counted, his finger gripping the emergency pull—one-and-a-two—he felt the wrench and jar under his arm-pits, the thud against the back of his padded cap as the folds of black synthane ballooned above them. Heard Bodey's sardonic, "Nice view—but too blamed cold for comfort." He grinned a tight, strained grin and looked downward.

Brilliantly lighted, the Overlord's Throne lay like a jeweled mosaic among snow-capped peaks. As the plateau leaped skyward, details appeared. Parklike expanses of precisely trimmed green formed the setting for glittering buildings of metal and plastic, neon-tubed and garish, where the tyrant government of Earth held sway. One great structure of glistening steel in the center of the plateau stood out by virtue of its shape, a perfect six-pointed star, the symbol of the Overlord. Crimson lights flooded the top of the famous Star Tower which held the Council Hall of Andreu and his lieutenants.

CURIOSLY Kerry peered into the sky around him. As far as the eye could see, he and Bodey were alone in the blackness. So perfectly were the others concealed by their lustreless black that they defied detection. He heard Bodey's voice thinly in his ears:

"Nice night for a murder!"

Kerry made no comment. Skillfully he maneuvered the 'chute toward the giant structure. A great flying field surrounded the tower, a field where Andreu's followers landed when they came to report to the Overlord. That was the destination of two hundred of them—the very heart of things, where they hoped to find the tyrant. Another hundred

would seek the communication center—fifty more, supply headquarters, and so on, completely covering the plateau. The wind caught the 'chute and swept it toward the Star Tower ... closer ... now to swerve....

To Kerry's taut senses came a shrill, thin whine, mounting in a swift crescendo. He'd been waiting for that—a powerful robot plane diving out of the blackness with a four-ton cargo of destruction—plummeting toward the quarters of the Overlord's Guard. Seconds after the first faint sound, it struck with a mighty roaring blast that rolled thunderously over the mountains, and an angry, lurid mass of smoke and flame plumed skyward. A direct hit, Kerry exulted, as fragments of stone and metal and plastic rained earthward. That would help—plenty!

With startling suddenness a hail of bursting shells flared toward them from batteries of concealed anti-aircraft guns—and simultaneously the lights of the Overlord's Throne winked into blackness! Kerry's eyes bored through the dark, broken only by shell blasts and the red glow of the burning building. They had expected this, of course—automatic detectors had picked them up and automatic defenses had been tripped into motion. One of the secrets Andrew had brought from the past. It didn't change things at all—if bursting shell fragments didn't blast them out of the sky. Their plan provided for this. Once they'd landed....

With a jar that shook them from head to foot, Kerry and Glenn Bodey crashed against a hard, smooth surface. Arms linking mechanically, they rolled over, tumbling away from the folds of the synthane 'chute. Training made their movements swift and sure—and in moments they sprang free of the mass of cloth. Grimly silent, they dropped prone upon the plastic runway, rocket blasters gripped in their hands. Simple weapons, these, designed for a specific job—that of getting into the tower.

With his left hand Kerry drew a small, tubular flare from a belt compartment, thrust a finger through a

ring at one end and began counting slowly. A minute must pass....

As the seconds dragged by, Kerry's straining senses caught faint sounds somehow penetrating through the incessant crash and rattle of gunfire—soft thuds of rubber-soled shoes, the swish of yards of synthane; then as the minute neared its end the faint sounds ceased. All the troopers should have landed now... Seconds....

With one swift movement Kerry flung the flare far from him, retaining the ring release, and watched through slitted eyelids. Scaringly a brilliant white glare burst the blackness asunder to be followed instantly by deeper blackness; and upon the retina of every man's eyes was stamped a photographic picture of their surroundings. Kerry saw black mounds dotting the plastic everywhere—saw the glistening smoothness of the blued steel that blocked the entrance into the Citadel.

With the speed of thought Kerry pointed his rocket blaster and squeezed its release, sending the single powerful charge of the weapon hissing meteorlike toward the barrier. It struck with a crackling report, that merged into a single ear-splitting blast as the weapon in the hand of every paratrooper spoke. Most of the shells struck the target—and where they struck, streamers and tongues and droplets of white hot fire bit savagely into the steel. Nothing made of metal could long withstand that concentrated inferno of heat.

As one the black-clad horde leaped erect and charged toward the door, running in a weaving crouch. Useless rocket blasters clattered to the runway to be replaced by lethal Ghormley automatics with their hundred rounds of explosive pellets. As they ran, they formed into an irregular wedge with Kerry Kord at its apex.

Through the widening slits and gaping holes in the door Kerry saw the interior of the Council Hall, and at its far end the incredible splendor of Andrew's throne. The space within the great room was a bedlam of

scurrying men and women, varicolored lights gleaming on the bare flesh and scanty attire of the decadent rulers.

As he ran, Kerry drew a grenade from his belt and held it in readiness, his fingers on the firing pin. Great gaping holes now appeared in the door, molten steel dripping from their brightly burning edges; as he drew close, Kerry paused momentarily and hurled the bomb through the opening. A breathless instant—a bursting, rending roar of flame and yellow-green smoke—and Kerry hurtled swiftly through the ragged ring of flame!

CHAPTER II

THE MINUTES that followed were a nightmare of bloody, roaring slaughter. The forces of the Overlord, their minds already befuddled with their hours of carousing, were completely demoralized, capable of only the most feeble resistance. Flight was the universal impulse. As the men of the Remnant poured through the burning doorway to spread fanwise across the hall, they swept the massed revelers before them like sheep. It was slaughter—and slaughter without quarter. They had come as executioners to wipe out Andrew and his followers, root and branch—and prisoners had no place in their plan.

As he sped through the huge chamber, firing methodically at every fleeing figure within range, Kerry's mind wavered between satisfaction at the success of their attack thus far and a vague sense of uneasiness. It was unbelievable that the Overlord could be so completely unprepared for attack. The element of surprise had given them an unquestioned advantage, and the celebration of 'Liberation Day' with its attendant debauchery had helped a lot. Then too, there had been no organized resistance for so long a period that the danger of an uprising had seemed completely past. But certainly Andrew had additional automatic de-

fense installed during the early days of his reign when the danger of revolt must have been something to cope with; to think otherwise was to underestimate the Overlord's intelligence.

Kerry scanned the chamber with quick, keen glances, while charging ahead with unbroken stride. Two things in particular he noted. The Overlord's throne was empty; and everyone ran as though by prearranged plan toward a narrow doorway in the far wall close to the throne—streaming through it in a steady unbroken line.

The Overlord, certainly, had preceded his followers through that doorway!

Casting a glance behind him, Kerry saw that he still led the pack, though Bodey was at his heels. With a single piercing shout he sprinted toward the narrow opening, ignoring the panicstricken stragglers who scurried away at his approach. His cry seemed to have spurred the fleeing mass to new effort, for suddenly the narrow doorway became jammed with a fighting, squirming mass of humanity. Grimly Kerry hurled a grenade, a second, a third—and as the thunderous detonation rolled through the room, the doorway cleared completely.

As he reached the opening, an ominous roar swept through the hall and he glanced over his shoulder. His face blanched. A withering rain of machine gun fire was sweeping the hall from openings in both side walls! Someone, somewhere, had been waiting till the room had cleared of Andrew's men—then had set off batteries of weapons, trained in devastating crossfire. His comrades were dropping on every hand.

A furious curse burst from him as Bodey reached his side. A trap—and they had been caught in it!

"Up to us, Glenn," he rasped, whirling and thrusting his Ghormley into its holster. Nothing but grenades now—and Andrew their only objective.

The room they had entered was far smaller than the Council Hall, and in its far end were jammed a mass of the rulers, struggling to enter four large elevators that lined the wall. Four elevators—and all the doors were open! None had yet left ground level.

WITH COMMON consent Kerry and Bodey began throwing grenades, their advance slowed to a walk. Thunderous reverberations rocked the room, mingled with the shrieks and screams of the injured. Choking, acrid smoke billowed across the chamber—and like black robots the two men of the Remnant stalked through the shambles.

Kerry, grim-faced, narrow-eyed, kept his gaze fixed on the open elevator doors. In one of them, he was certain, was Andrew. If only he could plant a grenade within those little cubicles! He aimed carefully, but the cast fell short—and as the smoke of the explosion eddied away, he saw the door slide shut. One was gone! That last grenade had done the trick.

Kerry's fingers groped for another grenade—found it—and he realized suddenly that it was his last one. Better keep it for an emergency. He gripped the butt of his Ghormley, turned to Bodey.

"Glenn," he snapped, "we've got to get to those elevators quick. Andrew's in one of them—and we must get him! You take the right—"

He broke off abruptly as a familiar stentorian voice rose above the bedlam. The Overlord!

"Attention! Cowards! Only two men are attacking you! The rest have been wiped out. Turn and destroy them!"

The words took instant effect upon the milling mass. Heads turned and an ominous roar surged from scores of throats. And suddenly a beam of intense brilliance flashed toward the two men from the heart of one of the elevators. From a weapon, Kerry thought, in the hands of Andrew himself.

"A grenade, Glenn," he snapped

through tight lips. If the mob turned on them, their chances were slim. Panic had been their strongest ally.

"All gone," Bodey grunted laconically.

Kerry grasped his last bomb. "Then follow me and get to that second elevator. Fast!" He hurled the grenade into the thick of the mob; and as it roared its message of death he dashed with every ounce of strength toward the cubicle that must hold the Overlord. One hand clutched the Ghormley; with the other he drew a foot-long, razor-sharp knife.

Savagely he fought his way through the close-packed mass of humanity, slashing, kicking, his automatic blasting. Hands that clutched at him were swept aside as, weaving, darting, leaping, he pressed furiously toward the Overlord.

He heard a chorus of agony and fear rise ahead of him—caught a glimpse of that searing beam of the Overlord cutting scythelike through the bodies of his own men! Clearing the elevator! With a furious oath Kerry leaped high and fired at the source of beam—and the door closed smoothly upon a lone figure standing erect amid sprawling bodies.

Unreasoning rage seized Kerry Kord. Afterward he had only a vague recollection of a melee of writhing torsos, clutching hands, blows, amid a clamor of screams and explosions—then somehow he had reached an elevator—had plunged within upon a squirming mound of men and women. The door slid shut, and they shot skyward. Reason returned when a terrified feminine voice shrieked almost in his ear:

"Here's one of them!"

Kerry thought swiftly. He couldn't hope to overcome a score of people, though they were unarmed, in such close quarters if they really resisted. His Ghormley was practically useless here since he couldn't fire it without endangering himself. There was only one way out—bluff.

"Quiet!" he roared bitingly, his voice cold and incisive. "You have

one chance to live. I'm after the Overlord, not you." He thrust up a clenched fist in which was gripped one of the tubular flares. "You've seen the effects of these grenades—and if you resist I'll release this one right now. We'll die, every one of us. If you tell me where Andreu went you may go. Your answer—quick!"

A dozen voices clamored: "The top of the tower—he's got a plane there! that's where he is!"

SCOWLING threateningly Kerry surveyed the faces turned toward him. What he saw on the bruised and perspiring countenances convinced him they were telling the truth. One dark-eyed girl said boldly, "I hope you get him. He blasted us with that pistol of his to save his own skin."

Inspired by the example of bolder spirits, others in the crowd began cursing Andreu. Kerry listened without comment, revulsion faintly curling his lips. They could be courageous—now.

The elevator came to rest of its own volition and someone slid back the door. Eagerly they pushed aside to clear a path for Kerry. With his fist held high above him for all to see, Kerry stalked into the open, glimpsing the black sky overhead. He saw something else—a gleaming metal dome in the center of the six-pointed star that was the top of the Star Tower.

And the hangar was ablaze with light, the muffled roar of rocket jets rising from within!

Kerry spun toward the elevator. Already the door was closing upon Andreu's satellites, all too eager to escape unharmed. It slid shut and Kerry turned to sprint toward the glittering dome.

As he ran, he thought of the plane and the hangar. This was something unforeseen in the plans of the Ten, something which Remnant Intelligence had overlooked. From the sky this hangar could not be seen, concealed, perhaps, by super-camouflage, or more logically, hidden

in the floor below, and raised to roof level mechanically when needed. Once in the plane, escape might readily be accomplished by the Overlord.

Kerry had had ideas of his own concerning Andreu's possible manner of escape if attacked....About ten years before, Kerry's father had been a scientist of world prominence. Working in the laboratories of the State, his sympathies had nonetheless been with the Remnant, of which he had been an important though secret member. Then one day he had been summoned by the Overlord—and that was the last he had ever been seen by the Remnant. Rumor had said that he had successfully completed a series of experiments upon something in which Andreu had been interested and had died so his knowledge might be the Overlord's alone. Kerry's jaws clenched at the thought. He had a personal score to settle....But of greater importance was the fact that he knew the subject of his father's experimentation. It was mastery of the Fourth Dimension—travel through time!

Conceding that it could be done, what could be more logical than the thought that this man who had come out of the past would flee into a future age if flight became necessary, where he might again gain a world empire?

As the polished walls of the hangar loomed above him, Kerry looked for a doorway, and found one just as a wide section of the wall moved aside to permit the exit of a plane. Darting into the hangar, he hesitated briefly while his eyes raced over the strangely designed rocket ship that half-filled the open space before him.

In that momentary glimpse he saw it was a rocket plane as large as many commercial stratosphere transports, equipped with nose and tail vents, transparent plastic control cabin and possessing wings of extraordinary length. The strangest feature of the machine, however, was the series of enormous hoops of inch-thick, crystalline tubing which

circled its tapering fuselage and that formed a border around the rim of the long, streamlined wings. Definitely, it was unlike any plane Kerry had ever seen—and suddenly he believed he knew why. The time traveling equipment had been installed in the plane!

He wasted no more time in examination, for the rear rockets were roaring a warning that in moments Andreu would be on his way. A glance at the transparent nose of the plane revealed that the Overlord was not at the controls; but he must be somewhere in the ship. With his Ghormley held in readiness, Kerry sprang to the nearest door and turned the catch. It moved easily under his hand and the door opened inward.

With every nerve wire-taut, Kerry eased himself through an opening he made barely wide enough to admit his powerful form—and with the suddenness of a lightning bolt, a blinding, coruscating flare of light knifed his brain and utter blackness engulfed him.

CHAPTER III

WHEN consciousness returned to Kerry Kord he first became aware of the steady cruising blast of rockets, aggravating the throbbing in his head. His second impression was one of some burdensome pressure weighing him down, pressing him painfully against a hard, smooth surface. This sensation ended, and he heard the dry, sardonic chuckle of the Overlord.

"You may as well open your eyes," a deep voice said coldly. "I know you are conscious and you can't possibly overpower me with a surprise attack."

Still slightly dazed, Kerry opened his eyes and forced himself into a sitting position. He was on the floor of the control room of Andreu's plane. The massive form of the World Dictator stood at the controls, directing the flight of the craft, his

eyes for the moment fixed in cold appraisal upon Kerry. Surprisingly, Kerry discovered, his arms and legs were free.

Divining his thoughts the Overlord said dispassionately, "You aren't bound because some of your impetuous friends arrived at the hangar in time to hurry my take-off a bit—but then, I don't consider you of too great importance. You are unarmed, and I am very well armed. And even in direct physical attack, I consider myself quite able to defend myself without weapons. You are here and alive, frankly, because I like company."

Kerry rose slowly to his feet, feigning weakness. He was himself again; and through narrowed lids he surveyed Andreu, weighing his chances of overpowering him. It was the first time he had been this close to the Dictator and he had to admit that the man was a formidable figure. Well over six feet tall, he was tremendously broad-shouldered, yet despite his bulk, he gave the impression of liteness. And his face, angular and strong-jawed, crowned by a high, broad forehead, was one of tremendous power. The wide mouth and deep-set glittering eyes, especially, bore an expression of arrogance and self-assurance. Certainly an antagonist not to be taken lightly.

Andreu spoke again in a casual voice, his keen eyes sweeping the instrument panel. "Now that your inspection has convinced you that precipitate action would be unwise, let us dispense with sham and relax. You'll find a seat behind you. You may as well enjoy a journey which I believe you will find unique."

Quite a showman, Kerry thought as he dropped into a deeply upholstered chair. He raised an eyebrow in studied boredom as he spoke for the first time.

"Thanks!" Then after a brief pause, "I don't suppose there's much sense in my asking where we're going."

Andrej frowned as though giving the matter thought. "I see no reason for withholding information which you cannot possibly use—though 'when' might be more accurate than 'where'." He glanced at the altimeter. "At the moment we are approximately twelve thousand feet above the Himalayas. We are moving in a wide circle above the general vicinity of my headquarters. Since we have, I believe, risen to sufficient height, in a few moments we will be a thousand years in the future, completely beyond the reach of your—Remnant. For our journey lies through the Fourth Dimension, Time!"

Andrej fixed his eyes on Kerry's and they began to blaze wrathfully. The casual, studied superciliousness fell from him, and all the venomous hatred and fury within the man's being seemed to find expression on his face.

"When I return, I'll bring with me the knowledge and might—the weapons—of another civilization—and I'll use that knowledge to destroy utterly the upstarts who dared to resist their master! They'll not die easily—they'll die slowly, cursing the Remnant!"

IN SPITE OF himself, Kerry Kord felt a momentary thrill of dread. A madman Andrej certainly was—but a madman who *had* enslaved a world.

Andrej's words continued as the fingers of one hand darted over the control panel and the other hand drew a rocket pistol from his belt. "Do not move until I give you permission. In seconds we'll be traveling through the time warp. I have never made this trip—but another has, and the machine does work—and if anything seems amiss you'll die instantly." Dropping into the pilot's seat, he fixed his gaze on the tele-viewer which now revealed only empty blackness below the plane, and he depressed a button at the top of the panel.

A faint, soundless vibration seized the ship and its occupants, mounting swiftly to a mighty quivering that

threatened momentarily to shake every molecule of matter within the range of the time machine into its component atoms. Kerry's thoughts were a garbled, jumbled, inchoate mass, as though the vibration had set thought impulses quivering into being without rational guidance. Memories of childhood mingled with flashing images of purely imaginary things. Emotions shook him in kaleidoscopic disorder. Sights and sounds of maddening intensity mingled with an incredible hegira of all his senses, as though every nerve in his mind and body were a string in some strange instrument, and a mad musician were playing the combined discords of all eternity. And all of this concentrated in a single timeless instant.

Suddenly it ended!

Like a spring unwinding, Kerry Kord's muscles relaxed. Had the time machine worked? He was sure it had, for he had confidence in his father's work, and he believed that in all probability he knew as much or more about the device than the Overlord.

He looked at Andrej, a question on his lips—and his eyes widened with sudden interest and a flare of hope surged through him. Andrej seemed frozen into rigidity, staring incredulously into the viewing plate, his expression one of utter consternation. His pistol dangled limply from flaccid fingers. Without a glance at Kerry he arose and strode into the transparent nose of the ship. As he stared at whatever lay beyond, his massive frame seemed to sag limply, and Jerry heard him utter dazedly:

"What—what happened? Where's—the Earth?"

Craning his neck, Kerry stared at the tele-viewer, and his forehead furrowed in a thoughtful frown. Certainly there was reason for Andrej's surprise. The blackness of space filled the oval screen, star-flecked space sweeping past in a constantly changing panorama as the rocket plane described its circular orbit. Now red light flared suddenly in the screen—light, Kerry saw through narrowed, tear-filled eyelids, streaming from a crimson, cooling binary

sun! Twin suns like burnished copper discs large as dinner plates, circling about each other!

The double sun vanished, moving out of the viewer's field of vision, and almost instantly the surface of a planet sprang into view. They were dangerously close, for details were plainly visible. A strange world of vast level plains covered with pallid gray-green vegetation, of low, rolling hills worn smooth by the weathering of milleniums. An ancient world of shallow, tideless seas, a world as Earth might be in a million years.

But this wasn't Earth—Kerry knew it beyond a shadow of a doubt. It was a smaller world—and never would old Earth revolve around a binary star. Kerry's thoughts raced. There must be an explanation.... there was something his father had said concerning time travel.... Kerry's wonderment suddenly dissipated and he grinned to himself. There were some things about travel through the time dimension that Andreu didn't know....

Andreu! With feline smoothness Kerry slid to his feet, his rubber-soled boots making no sound on the metal floor. He sent lightning glances darting about for a weapon, but he saw nothing that would serve. His fists curled into hard knots and his muscles quivered with anticipation. This was his chance—and he dared not fail!

He had crossed most of the intervening distance when something seemed to warn Andreu, for Kerry saw him stiffen. He covered the last few yards in a whirlwind rush, his right fist drawn far back—and as Andreu spun around, that fist drove home with every ounce of power of Kerry's command.

CHAPTER IV

ANDREU reeled backward to crash heavily into the nose of the rocket ship. His pistol spun from his hand, skittered against the smooth wall and landed a dozen feet away.

Swiftly the big man leaped erect, shaking himself like some great ani-

mal. His face was that of a beast of prey, the veins standing out on his forehead like ugly, bloated worms. A guttural oath oozed from between his clenched jaws as he sprang.

Kerry met his charge with savage blows of both fists against the jutting jaw; then the force of the charge carried them into a clinch. Kerry winced as a white hot knife of pain stabbed him—Andreu's knee finding the pit of his stomach. Viciously he drove his fingers into the Overlord's eyes, and the big man writhed free, sucking his breath between his teeth. He leaped back out of the range of Kerry's fists, his low, rasping snarl a sound horrible to hear—then swiftly he charged, his neck swollen and his eyes engorged with blood.

Kerry ducked under a heavy blow, landed a powerful overhand swing, then staggered back as Andreu's fist landed solidly against his chin. The Overlord followed, an insane chuckle rumbling deep in his throat, his great fists swinging. Some of the blows Kerry caught on fists and forearms; others reached their mark; and Kerry began to realize that every advantage lay with Andreu. Despite the years which he must have lived, he was physically in his prime and a tremendously powerful man.

Desperately Kerry leaped for Andreu's throat. His hands found their hold—and simultaneously two rigid thumbs drove into his own windpipe. They crashed to the floor, locked in deadly embrace. An icy pang of fear swept up Kerry's spine. The neck in his grasp seemed to swell and solidify like a pillar of stone—and his own throat was yielding to that merciless pressure. Frantically his fingers clawed at the Overlord's contorted visage. The man was killing him! He felt his lungs swelling unbearably, and black spots danced and grew before his eyes. Fear made his thoughts desperately clear. He remembered something he had seen during a fight in the dark tunnels under New York. If only he could get some air....

His fingers hooked in the corners of Andreu's mouth and he pulled. With a grunt of pain the Overlord

tore his face free from the rending fingers, releasing Kerry's throat. With the first great draft of air, Kerry wrenched his head upright and clasped his hands behind the other's skull. A split second of bunching muscles, and with all his strength he drove the top of his head into Andrew's face!

The ghastly crunch of splintering bone grated on the air, and the Overlord screamed with pain. He tore fiercely at Kerry's hands, but the fingers were locked. Again the smaller man battered with brutal, stunning force; a shudder of agony wracked Andrew's frame and he sagged limply, a faint brutish whine sobbing in his throat and his breath blubbling through smashed lips and flattened bleeding nose.

WITH HEAVING lungs Kerry Kord rolled free and reeled to his feet. He looked down at the beaten dictator, savage satisfaction in his narrowed eyes. Something of the personal debt he owed had been paid.

"Andrew!" he barked.

The big man started fearfully and his trembling fingers strove to wipe the blood from his eyes. "Yes," he whispered hoarsely, desperate fear in his voice.

"You were startled by what you saw outside the plane. Why?"

Andrew sucked in a tortured breath. "We—we are out in space—and the Sun and the Earth—have disappeared! Even the constellations—have changed! Something went wrong!"

Kerry grinned mirthlessly. "Nothing went wrong. What has happened was to be expected. Nothing else *could* happen! We have travelled in moments a thousand years of time through the Fourth Dimension. We travelled independently of three dimensional space—and the Earth, the Solar System, was moving away from us into infinity at an inconceivable speed for a thousand years! We moved into our future a thousand years through Time in less than a minute—but no machine imaginable by our intelligence could travel in

those moments through the infinite distances in space which our Solar System and Galaxy have traversed in ten centuries." *

Andrew's terrified whine was a sickening thing. Courage and morale were completely broken. "Then—then we're lost out here in space—without supplies—*alone!*" The last word was little more than a gasp; and the big man buried his ruined face in his hands and wept.

With a shudder of revulsion Kerry picked up the rocket-pistol and thrust it into the holster which had held his Ghormley. He found his knife and automatic in a niche beside the control panel and thrust them into his belt. Then he centered his attention upon the dials and gauges that controlled the flight of the ship through space and time. The plane had a standard rocket drive, he noted with satisfaction; that would cause him no difficulty.

Carefully he noted their position as Andrew had set it when starting their orbit around the Himalayan peaks. Carefully he calculated the time that had elapsed since they had started their journey. Then with skillful touch he sent the ship into a steep dive toward the ancient world below them.

Smoothly he brought the plane to rest in a bleak little valley beside a tiny watercourse. Dwarf trees, shorter than a man and crowned with dull gray-green foliage, lined its banks. There was no sign of animal life save a small froglike creature basking in the light of the crimson

(Please turn to Page 107)

*According to Harlow Shapley, our entire watch-shaped Galaxy rotates around a central axis, not as a solid, but with different speeds at different distances from the center. Measures of radial and transverse motions indicate that at our distance from the center of the Galaxy (some 30,000 light years) our speed in the orbit of revolution is something like two hundred miles a second. Accordingly, the Solar System would have been moving away from the time machine at the rate of two hundred miles a second for a thousand years...In addition, the Galaxy itself is supposedly rushing away from some central point in the universe, separating the rocket plane from the Solar System by a corresponding distance.

THE RACE TO THE MOON



SENSATIONAL NEWS FOR SCIENCE-FICTION FANS FROM OUR
HOLLYWOOD (ON THE MOON) CORRESPONDENT!

FORREST J. ACKERMAN

HOLLYWOOD, in its usual colossal, fashion, has just launched not one but two rockets to the Moon! The first, rocketship *Pal*, a 150' atomic-powered job designed by ace science fictioneer, Robert Heinlein—in technicolor! The second, a 180' step-rocket patterned after *Life's* lunar ship pictured late last year, and "piloted" by Kurt Neumann.

The fact is that movie producer Geo. Pal has an interplanetary film, **DESTINATION MOON**, that was already shown to the public; and almost simultaneously the Neumann directed **ROCKETSHIP X-M** will be released.

Now, as a science-fiction fan, the magic syllable "stf" is your Open Sesame to a closed set on a Studio lot. Come with me in imagination—240,000 miles, not straight up but on a Hohmann orbit—and set foot with me on the Moon as you will see it pictured in the Eagle-Lion release.

The set, designed by Chesley Bonestell, is literally off-this-earth. Bonestell is the artist with cameras in his blood whose graphic paintings of astronomical bodies have thrilled science fan and layman alike right

into a 3d edition of the Willy Ley book, "The Conquest of Space".

The set is a lunar landscape 173' long and 120' across. We stand at the base of Moon Rocket No. 1 that towers 150' into the—I almost said air, but then of course there is no atmosphere on the Moon. That's why the 4 figures emerging from the airlock of the ship are clad in space-suits. On their backs they carry oxygen tanks, around their waists walkie-talkie units. The scene is just a rehearsal, so actor Warner Anderson (playing Dr. Cargraves, leading atomic physicist of 1960) gags it up by groaning, "I wish there was more space in this suit!" Altho theoretically inflated with air, in actuality the suits are padded with wool, and altogether weigh 100 lbs. apiece.

You will be interested to learn that by close observation I established the scientifact, once and for all, that the Moon is not made of green cheese (I swiped a few samples of solidified lava flow, which I will gladly sell lunatics at \$100,000 per gram).

To insure astronomical accuracy, Robert Heinlein, the author of the book from which the picture was

adapted ("Rocket Ship Galileo") was employed as technical director. From him I pieced together the plot, when he was not busy suggesting that coke bottles be cleared off the Moon or warning someone near the camera it wouldn't do for a puff of cigaret smoke to suddenly appear in empty space. Here's a preview of the picture:

Five years of preparations go up in one big pyrotechnic blaze when the first satellite rocket explodes several years hence. The hopes of setting a rocket on the Moon go glimmering and it is not till 1960 that they are revived. "You see," explained Heinlein, "it was discovered that the first rocket didn't just blow up—it was sabotaged."

Furthermore, it is learned thru military intelligence that alien eyes are on the Moon with the thought of "Tomorrow the Moon—the day after tomorrow, the World!" For who controls the Moon could easily conquer the earth. The conquest of space now becomes a race for supremacy of the American ideology.

With the perfection by Dr. Chas. Cargraves of a practical atomic engine and the financial backing of leading industrialist Jim Barnes, the first personnel-carrying Moon rocket is made ready. Cargraves and Barnes make the daring leap into space, accompanied by an Army officer and a radar man.

For the first time since the legendary *Frau im Mond* of a generation ago, science fiction enthusiasts have the opportunity to experience the vicarious thrill of a filmatic trip to the Moon. Realistically pictured are the amazing and amusing floating effects of objects and human beings inside the ship during free fall...a near disaster in deep space when the scientist's magnetic boots are accidentally disconnected from the skin of the ship and he drifts in the void...the pancaking flattening of the human features under a 6-gravity take-off. And there are the awe-inspiring astronomical sights of our own Earth suspended in space against a backdrop of stars, and the majestic mountains and craters of

that land in the sky called Luna.

"They stay 5 days on the Moon," according to Heinlein, "high up in the northern latitude, in the Crater Harpalus, and then have the devil's own time getting back to Earth. Because of some minor miscalculations, a lot of invaluable reaction mass had to be used up in making the landing; and now, in order to return, they have to sacrifice everything but the kitchen sink. Even the radio goes, to lighten the lunar take-off, and this leaves them without means of contacting Earth."

Does the rocket ever safely get back to Earth? The conclusion of the picture hasn't been filmed yet when I was on the set. Fortunately, none of us will have to wait 10 years to learn the fate of the rocket. "To keep ahead of reality!" Director Irving Pichel informed me. "We have filmed **DESTINATION MOON** as a sort of documentary view into the near future, and we don't want the headlines overtaking us!"

Many problems were met and conquered in the creation of this ambitious undertaking. When the first "rushes" revealed that all those white stars out there in space (tiny electric globes surrounded by cellophane) were halating red on the screen, they had to be sheathed in green in order to photograph white! The interior of the spaceship had to be built in the form of a giant gimbal so that acceleration couches, instrument panels, et al, could rotate thru 360 degrees during the nullification of gravity sequences. You can only travel so far on a 173' stage, and in order to obtain the illusion of the spacemen being at great distances from the camera, a most novel dodge was developed: *mid-gets!* Three miniature space-suited figures at one time and another substitute for the full-grown actors.

If you are all a good audience and applaud loudly at the end of each performance and see the picture at least 10 times (as I intend to), Producer Pal has promised that he will produce another great science fiction film. Its title? This one is really a classic: *When Worlds Collide!*

THE GUINEA - PIG

by CEDRIC
WALKER

Everything made to measure, that was the idea of the biologist. Even re-creation of the human body was not beyond them now.....

SELLON looked at his visitor and wished heartily that he were anywhere else in the world. He thought: *This is how the boys must feel when they're hauled up before me for putting jam in someone's football boots.*

He smiled inwardly. It wasn't that he felt he was in the wrong. On the contrary, he *knew* that he was right. His self-analysis had told him the obvious fact that unless he were absolutely convinced that he was acting for the best, he would never have



presumed to question the actions of such a man as this.

Even now, against his will, he couldn't help feeling over-awed. He braced himself and said: "That is my considered opinion." How trite that sounded! "From the very beginning I was opposed to this—experiment, and the results so far appear to have borne me out."

Mostyn eyed him calculatingly. Despite himself, Sellon found himself shifting uneasily under that cold impersonal scrutiny. Hang the man! He looked at him as if he were one of his specimens under the microscope!

Feelingless devils, these biologists! They had to be forever probing and cutting and prying into the innermost secrets of things. Never content to leave well enough alone! It was unnatural, this perpetual, bloody tampering.... Nothing was sacrosanct any more! Not even recreation of the human body itself was beyond them now. They would never rest until they had completely obsoleted nature, and the whole world crept from their ghastly operating-tables!

Everything made to measure. Behold, the latest triumph of science—the human body! Lord knew, it wasn't that he was unprogressive! Sellon knew nobody could accuse *him* of that!

"We realize you've done your best," said Mostyn wearily. Was it imagination, or was there a note of impatience in his voice? "Maybe it hasn't been much of a success up to now. But we must go on, Sellon. We must win! We've created these creatures.....for better or worse they're here to stay. There's no going back now. When they dropped the bomb at Hiroshima that was that. Wasn't any use burling: 'They shouldn't have invented such a horrible thing. Let's outlaw the atom-bomb and then we can all go home and get on with the garden.' The bomb had come. Bend it to fit a man's hand, and you've got the finest tool imaginable. Well, after a bit of a schemozzle we bent it. Now we've got another problem on our

hands, and we'll get round this, too. But we need help, and it's people like you who can give us that help."

"I've done what I could. It's been given a fair trial, and I feel that there is little object in going on. After all, I've got the other boys to think of. God knows what harm this business may have done to them! You know, I suppose, that they've found out?"

The biologist gestured impatiently. "They had to find out sooner or later. So maybe it's for the best."

"Nevertheless—"

"May I remind you that the agreed time-limit has not yet expired?"

"Quite so." Sellon nodded reluctantly. He knew he was prejudiced. In all fairness he had no legitimate complaint. The man—hang him!—was asking nothing more than had been agreed. But the pill was nonetheless difficult to swallow.

"Incidentally," said Mostyn, "just how did they find out?"

Sellon shrugged. "You know how boys are. You can't keep anything from them." He smiled. "If you have a row with your wife the little blighters know it the next morning. A school is no place for a man with a past. It wasn't only the trouble he had telling left from right. Lots of humans are ambidextrous—though it isn't quite the same thing, of course.

"When he was batting he'd sometimes take up a left-handed stance and sometimes the normal one. The others couldn't help noticing. Then he had trouble with his knife and fork.... An uncanny sight, that, seeing him using them in opposite hands as easily as we do in the usual manner. We used to correct him every time we saw him do it, and he'd change over as smooth as you please, and hardly miss a mouthful!

"But it wasn't only that. It was the way he looked at times. I've only seen these creatures on one or two occasions, but they had the same expression in their eyes. You know what I mean—the way they have of sometimes appearing to look right through you. It always gave me an

uncanny feeling." Sellon shuddered inwardly. Soulless devils, they were! What was it they called those things?.... Zombies! That was it.

"I know." Mostyn passed a hand wearily over his face. "That's the sort of thing we're up against. Foolish prejudice. Superstition. Silly fairy-tales about monsters and such-like. Oh, it's all been exploited to the full by our opponents! They've done their worst, and I must admit they've made a pretty good job of turning peoples minds against the androids for good. But we'll lick 'em." A gleam came into his large black eyes, and his lips tightened. "We must!"

Takes it pretty seriously. Sellon thought. Wasn't as though it were a matter of life and death for him. The world had got on all right before the androids came, and would probably be able to struggle on without their assistance for a few more millennia. Matter of personal pride, he supposed. After all, Mostyn was the man chiefly responsible for the existence of these beings.

"How did the other boys take him?" asked Mostyn.

"Well, at first they were almost too scared to go near him. That's after they knew, of course. They'd heard such weird tales about them—naturally they were wary. But that didn't last very long. Then they began to treat him as something of a curiosity. Like all new boys, of course, he had been subjected to the usual ragging. Normally, that wouldn't have meant a great deal: he would have got it over and been accepted as one of them.

"Unfortunately, he didn't react in the customary manner. In fact, he strongly objected to the whole business of initiation. Said the things he was expected to do were undignified, and that the purpose behind it was—as far as he could see—silly and unnecessary, and entirely unfitting a *human being*!" Sellon spread out his hands at the last words. A human being! The idea of it! He looked expectantly at the other.

Mostyn did not smile.

SELLON snorted impatiently. The idea, apparently, didn't strike him as outrageous at all!

"You see," said Sellon, "that's the one thing the androids haven't got."

"What's that?"

"Why, tradition." Sellon frowned, and looked searchingly at his visitor. Was the man being deliberately obtuse? He made no sign of having heard, but continued gazing out of the window at the distant playing-fields. "Tradition," Sellon repeated, firmly.

Mostyn turned to face him slowly. "Oh," he said, "Tradition." There was no trace of amusement in his eyes, but Sellon felt suddenly a complete fool.

Of course, he knew the bare statement was ridiculous. He had meant it not as a statement of fact but as a comment on the vast gulf that separated the androids from human-kind. He had intended—oh the devil!—he knew what he had meant. Not so this cold, unsmiling devil before him! His dislike of the man deepened.

Why didn't these people get out of their stinking laboratories—out into the sun amongst ordinary folk? Get married. Have children. Do the things that everyone else did. Enjoy the bounty of nature—instead of grubbing round in her back alleys. Great Scientist Mostyn with a girl in his arms....whispering sweet nothings.....the picture just would not come. He would probably be able to explain it all in terms of glands and secretions and what-not.

"Yes, I see what you mean," said Mostyn, surprisingly.

Sellon perked up. Well!....

"But they will have, you know, one day. There will be a time when they will be absorbed into society on equal terms just as the Negro has been, and their very origin will be forgotten. Forgive me. I have no wish to preach."

Sellon made a conventional gesture, at the same time hoping he would not continue.

"Don't you understand, man?"

Mostyn leaned forward. It was the

first time he had shown any trace of passion. "We can't keep them out there on Venus forever! Daily they grow in numbers and knowledge. They can reproduce themselves in their laboratories. We cannot stop them now—even if we wished to do so. They have been accepted as humans—in theory. But they cannot live here on Earth. We smooth our consciences by granting them equal status, but they must not work with humans, they cannot enter our libraries, our transports, our restaurants—in fact they cannot—except under very rare circumstances—come to Earth at all.

"At last what we had dreamed of has come to pass, and the first child had been born to the androids in the natural way. Can you realize what that means, Sellon? The first android child! Now in truth they are human!" He paused, and searched Sellon's face. "That is why this experiment is so important. If it succeeds there will be no further obstacle: the human race will have to accept the androids!"

Damn him! Sellon thought. The man's right, after all. It was all entirely reasonable. But it didn't make him like the idea any better. Not that he had much choice. He'd got his orders, and he'd carry them out to the best of his ability.

"You'd like to see the—boy, of course?" he said.

Mostyn nodded. The head-master spoke into the audio on his desk.

IN A FEW moments there was a knock on the door, and a small figure stood before them.

Mostyn rose with outstretched hand, smiling. He was human, after all. Even if his androids weren't.

The boy's face had been glum at first, but it brightened miraculously as his gaze fell on the scientist.

Sellon thought: If you didn't know you could certainly mistake him for a human boy. Nothing at all on the surface—apart from that oddly-penetrating stare at times. Maybe he exaggerated that. Maybe the boy saw things that ordinary boys didn't. Had to admit he was above the average

in classwork. But that wasn't everything.

The two seemed to have forgotten his presence. He coughed.

"If you would prefer it I—"

"Forgive me," said Mostyn, "It's been so long. Naturally, my interest Please stay. I should not dream of turning you out of your own room."

Sellon inclined his head. He listened without a great deal of interest as Mostyn questioned the boy about his work, asked about his friendships, whether he liked being at the school, and so on—in fact, behaved like any father visiting his son. Sellon found the thought amusing.

About the ragging episodes the boy was reticent. Small wonder, Sellon thought, in front of his head-master! "You see, Andy," said Mostyn, "It may be silly to you. It is silly. But then, it's the sort of silliness that's affected human beings in all ages—everywhere, and you've just got to get used to it and learn to put up with it. In fact—" he smiled—"you've just got to put up with us."

Sellon just barely managed to repress a snort of disgust. What stuff to put into the minds of such creatures!

The scientist was continuing, apparently unaware of the storm he was creating behind him. "By the way, Andy, in your fights. . . . how did you get on?"

For the first time the boy grinned. "I won," he said simply. The head-master cut in, speaking with heavy sarcasm. "If you like, I can show you some of the results of our young friend's experiments in remodeling the features of his fellows."

Mostyn shook his head, but could not restrain a smile. There was a look almost of pride on his face. Certainly, when he had made the androids he had made them strong and free from disease. Physically, they were certainly far superior to the average human being. But, Sellon thought, with repugnance, their perfection was entirely laboratory-made. Mass-production. A thousand perfect human beings,

quickly, please! There you are, sir, call again!

"You won fairly?" said Mostyn.

"Yes, sir. I'm stronger than they are. They all piled into me, but they couldn't lick me!"

Sellon thought: Now he's bragging. They all piled into him! Sellon glanced at Mostyn, hoping for signs of disapproval. But the scientist maintained his calm, detached air, like a student listening to a lecture and occasionally noting some outstanding point.

"Whatever happens, Andy," said Mostyn, "you must never lose your temper. Scrap, by all means, but remember that they don't see things as clearly as you do. What is clear to you may not always be so to the other boys. In many ways they are hampered; their thoughts are often over-clouded by emotions. Their heritage weighs heavily upon them in so much that they do. It is difficult, I know, but try and see things through their eyes, too."

Lay it on! Sellon said to himself. Talk to him as if he were one of your learned biologist friends instead of a child! Tell him that humans are creatures who go chasing around emoting love and hate all over the place! Pity you couldn't have seen him when he was knocking young Martin about! He'd looked pretty emotional himself just then!

"I'll try, sir," said the boy. "But they keep saying things—"

"What sort of things?"

"They joke about my mother and father. They say why don't they come and see me, like theirs do." He looked up wide-eyed at Mostyn.... A strange wash of feeling swept momentarily over Sellon. After all, he was only a child.... "Why don't they come and see me?" he urged.

For the first time Mostyn looked slightly uneasy.

Sellon stirred. Hallo? What was this?

"Listen, son," said the biologist, "maybe one day they'll come. At the moment, I'm afraid....."

Of course, there were rules—everyone knew that. But surely they could stretch a point... Sellon

checked himself— Hey! Remember he wasn't in sympathy with the thing from the beginning!

The boy asked about his mother.

"She's fine, son," Mostyn said, "fine. Last time I saw her."

The boy smiled happily. Then his face clouded. "And my father—why am I never allowed to see him? They keep asking about him."

Mostyn drew a deep breath before he spoke. He seemed to have trouble finding the right words. "Don't bother your head about that for the moment. There's a lot of things you'll find out as you grow older. When the time comes....." He patted the boy's head. "Now don't forget what I've told you. You've got to make a success of this, you know. We'll do it between us, won't we, eh?"

The boy's answering smile was like a burst of sunlight in the room. "All right," he said. But he didn't sound to Sellon as if he were really convinced.

SELLON sat down heavily in the chair. His face was ashen. My God! he thought. My God! He collected himself and took a deep breath. After a moment he pressed the switch and asked for long-distance.

The dark eyes of Mostyn looked at him from the screen. As he took in the troubled face of the headmaster his eyebrows lifted.

"What is it, man?"

Sellon spoke haltingly: "I—I cannot tell you over this—Mostyn, you must come at once! At once! It is.....most urgent!"

Mostyn's face loomed larger as he bent forward. "But what—?"

"At once, Mostyn!" Sellon blanked the screen. He sat staring into space. For the moment there was nothing he could do. Maybe there was nothing anyone could do. The body had been removed. The boys had returned—against their will—to the classrooms. To all appearances the school had returned to normal. He had not yet informed the boy's parents. No—better to wait until Mostyn arrived. It was his responsibility. That and.....Don't think about that for the moment! Then

what?.....we regret to inform you that your son is dead. He was killed.....A sudden wave of fury swept over Sellon. He'd told them! Why hadn't they listened to him? What else could be expected? Created...soulless.....

Suddenly Mostyn was before him. His face was gray, and he looked about a thousand years old. "Where is he now?" he bit out, and each word seemed to cost him an agony of effort.

Sellon said not a word. He walked across the room and took a mackinaw from the cupboard. He buttoned it with painful deliberation. Mostyn watched him silently.

Outside a steady drizzle was falling. A few gray clouds trailed disconsolately after each other across the darkling sky.

"It's not far," said Sellon. "On the hill yonder."

He managed the flitter with expert hands. The school dropped away, became a toy and vanished. They sped over the dismal, sodden land towards the distant hills.

Sellon thought: Why the devil doesn't the man say something? Obviously he knew. The janitor must have told him something. "There was a fight," he said, hating the fact that he had to tell him. But he knew he bad. "They had been calling him names—one boy in particular."

Mostyn seemed to come to life. He turned to face Sellon. It was as if for the first time he realized the presence of the other. "What sort of names?"

Sellon swallowed. He didn't like this. "The allusion wasn't even correct," he said, wondering why he made the words sound so apologetic.

"What name?"

"Frankenstein."

Mostyn turned away, his lips compressed. Sellon saw his hands clenching and unclenching. He said: "There was a fight. He lost his temper. When it was over the boy who had called him the name was dead. None of the masters learned of the fight until it was too late. The boys who were present said he had a mad look in his eyes, and they gave him

a wide berth. From the beginning they were always a bit afraid of him—even when they ragged him. They say he looked wildly around him and at the body of the boy for a time as if he were lost. When he made for the flitter-park they followed him, keeping at a respectable distance. But he seemed to have forgotten that they were there. Someone went for one of the masters. But by the time he had arrived the.....boy had scrambled into one of the flitters and was careering off madly over the tree-tops.

"But they're difficult things to handle—especially for a boy of his size. We saw the flitter continue its crazy flight for a time, dipping and weaving like a wounded bird, barely managing to keep above ground. The nose seemed to have a tendency to drop. Finally he slipped down below the hill—just there—and he didn't rise again.

"Here we are." Sellon touched the flitter down on the hillside as lightly as a feather.

Mostyn looked around him. About a hundred yards away down the hill was the wreckage of a flitter. Nearby a group of men stood motionless in the rain. Their faces were without expression. One of them had a crude bandage round one arm. Their heads drooped helplessly. They seemed to be waiting for something to happen. They hardly stirred as the two approached.

An icy dread washed over the headmaster. He singled out one of the men.

"He's gone mad," said the man. "Completely. He's got a gun from somewhere. One of the chaps was wounded. We daren't go near him."

"Where is he?" asked Mostyn.

THE MAN glanced at him for a moment, then gestured up the hillside towards a pile of rocks. "Up there somewhere. Can't tell you where exactly. He's been moving around behind them. He warned us, but we thought he was only saying that—like a boy would. Then he shot Wilson, so we've kept back. He keeps

shouting something about 'hope you're satisfied now.'"

Mostyn started walking towards the pile of rocks. Sellon clutched at his arm, but he shook him off. "Come back, you fool! He's mad! He'll kill you!" He hesitated then made to follow him.

A shot broke the silence of the hillside.

Sellon stopped dead in his tracks. Mostyn walked on as if he hadn't heard.

A shrill voice floated down the hill to them. "Go back! Go back or I'll shoot!"

Silence.

Mostyn walked on.

"This is what you wanted, isn't it? Just like in the story! Monster! Kill him! Hound him down! Death to the android-monsters! Death! Death!"

Sellon shuddered. The boy was mad! He watched Mostyn, waiting for the shot and the fall.

Nothing happened.

A score of yards away Mostyn halted.

"Listen, son," he said, "it's me! Mostyn! Come out and let me talk to you!"

"Keep away!"

Mostyn spread his arms wide. "Don't you see who it is? It's me! I want to help you, son. I understand

what happened. Come out and we'll talk it over—just you and me!"

No reply.

Sellon held his breath as Mostyn covered the remaining few yards. There was a sharp pain in his breast.

When the shot came it was almost like a physical impact to Sellon.

Mostyn stopped short. Sellon waited. But Mostyn did not fall. He seemed to have gone suddenly berserk. He scrambled wildly over the rocks and disappeared.

Sellon paused. Only for a second, then he started to run too. The group of men came after him.

When he found Mostyn, the scientist was holding the boy in his arms and muttering "My God" over and over again. The boy was quite dead.

Sellon looked at the face of the man. Somehow it struck a chord in his memory. What was it? Suddenly he knew. He had seen the same expression on the face of one of his masters after the man had received news of his son's death in World War III.

He knew then, and he turned away, his face ashen, motioning the rest to follow him.

They went quietly back down the slope. Behind him he heard Mostyn muttering softly, "My God!" again and again.

THE CATAAAA

(by A. E. Van Vogt continued from page 46)

sor of biology at State, aren't you?"

The other shook his head. "I was," he said. "I should have followed the cat's advice. But I felt it was important to tell other people what had happened. I was dismissed after three months, and I won't tell you what I'm doing now. But I must go on. The world must know about the weakness that makes us so vulnerable. Virginia? She married a pilot of big air firms. She fell for his line of self-dramatization."

He stood up. "Well, I guess I'll be on my way. I've got a lot of bars to visit tonight."

When he had gone, Ted paused momentarily in his evening's task of looking stupid. "There," he said, "is a guy who really has a line. Just imagine. He's going to tell that story about five times tonight. What a set-up for a fellow who wants to be the center of attention."

Myra giggled. Jones began to talk to Gord in his know-it-all fashion. Gord said, "Glub!" every few seconds, just as if he was listening. Cathy put her head on the table and snored drunkenly. And Morton sagged lower and lower into his chair.

AMAZING SCIENCE ADVENTURES

Startling Glimpses of the World of the Future!

★ ★ Has Communication With Other Planets Been Established? ★ ★

UNTIL QUITE recently, any suggestion that there might be life on the other planets of the solar system was likely to be treated with scorn. Almost any discussion on the subject went something like this:

"Mars? My dear fellow, the planet couldn't possibly support life! It possesses only half the diameter, and little more than a tenth of the substance, of the Earth. The surface is of similar composition to the Moon, that is, mostly craters and volcanic lava. There may be a certain amount of atmosphere; but if so, it is probably at the bottom of the craters. There is no direct evidence of water vapour in the atmosphere, although it may be present in small quantities; but there isn't enough of either water or air to support life.

"And anyway, why waste time discussing the matter? It's not much use trying to communicate if there's nobody there to answer. And as for visiting the place—why, the very idea is ridiculous!

"What about the other planets? Even more unlikely, I should say. Mercury? Don't you know that that planet is so close to the Sun that its surface temperature is always round about 675 degrees? And since it always presents the same face to the sun, the other side of the planet is freezing cold at all times.

"Phew! Not for me, thanks! And I cannot imagine any other form of life existing in such extremes. And the same goes for all the other planets, only more so. Either they are too cold, or too hot, or there is no atmosphere; or their mass is so great that living forms would be crushed to a pulp. Jupiter, for instance, contains 317 times as much substance as the earth, and the gravitational pull would make it impossible for a man to crawl, let alone stand upright."

That imaginary conversation is of course a synthesis of the kind of

arguments which were and are used against the suggestion that there might be life on other planets than our own. Only a few years ago—not so very long before Hiroshima in fact—these statements would have been trundled out as heavy artillery to demolish any belief that there could be life at least on Mars—the most likely planet to support it—or that communication of some sort might be feasible.

Then came the release of atomic energy, and Man's ideas and views altered almost overnight—especially as regards interplanetary travel. Already there are projects in hand which will result in the launching of the first space ships within a few years at the most. Atomic energy will supply the fuel to hurl these vessels through space at several thousands of miles an hour: and what then will prevent them from reaching the moon and planets in course of time? Nothing save the unknown hazards—as yet—of space travel.

But all this lies in the immediate future. What we are concerned with now, is to determine whether any attempts at communication with one or other of the planets have been already made; and if so, with what success?

Research into the matter indicates that a number of persons have actually transmitted alleged messages to Mars or some other extra-terrestrial destination: notably a Captain W who was a radio experimenter in Somerset in 1939; and a Dr. M. R., of London, who sent a radio signal to Mars from Rugby in 1924. The latter alleged that he had established communication with a Martian female called Oumaruroo or some similar outlandish name. Captain W was rather more cautious, and contented himself with the statement that—"we have some justification for assuming that we can get Mars now." It is not related whether he got any reply.

These instances are given to show

that since the advent of wireless telegraphy, man has been trying unobtrusively but persistently to establish contact with other worlds. It is worth bearing in mind that in 1924, and again in 1939, the planet Mars was at its closest to Earth—some 36 millions of miles.

An obvious question springs to the mind. If wireless messages were transmitted to Mars on these occasions, is there reliable external evidence that any signals were observed in reply, emanating from extra-terrestrial sources?

The reply would appear to be in the negative but it is interesting to note that in 1921 the late Marconi received and recorded definite systematic impulses on a wavelength of 150,000 metres, coming out of space from the direction of Sagittarius; and in 1924 the New York newspapers for August of that year reported the following: MYSTERY DOTS AND DASHES WAS MARS SIGNALLING? WHAT THE PHOTOGRAPHIC FILM REVEALED. *"The development of the photographic film of the radio signals for the 29 hour period while Mars was close to Earth, deepens the mystery of the dots and dashes*

heard by widely separated powerful stations. The film disclosed in black and white a regular arrangement of dots and dashes along one side. On the other, at about evenly spaced intervals, are curiously jumbled groups, each taking the form of a crudely drawn face."

Were these signals attempts to reply to messages sent from this Earth? Or were they independent efforts to attract the attention of this planet?

It has been said that had intelligible signals been transmitted from outer space, they would have been detected and decoded by experts long ago. That statement is advanced as proof that no attempts to communicate with this planet have been made. But it ignores at least two possibilities. One, that communication might have been established by means other than radio. The other, that general communication with this world might not be considered desirable, except with specific individuals.

Judging by the state of our world to-day, it is not unreasonable to suppose that other more civilized planets might possess prejudices....

P. E. JONES

★ ★ THE V-BOMB ★ ★

A BOMBSHELL burst in Southern California recently when noted author William Vogt predicted the end of the world not with a bang but a whimper. Addressing the Conference on Natural Resources, he forecast mankind's inevitable extinction just by "doing what comes naturally" even if an A-bomb, H-bomb or XYZ-bomb doesn't atomize us.

"We are doing Nature to death," he said; "her prodigality cannot go on much longer. If we are not to face starvation in the future, there must be an intensive world-wide conservation of natural resources coupled with a regulated birth-rate."

Vogt, who is the author of the book that has shocked thousands, "Road to Survival," gave his formula for salvation in the sort of scientific sounding terms that one might expect to encounter in a

novel by science-fiction's Vogt: *We must find a balance and unity in the 4th dimensional structure of bio-physical and cultural dependence of variables.*

Translated via the Semantikon, William Vogt's summation means that our problem is one of planetary ecology, that our life-giving wealth depends on proper integration of soil and city life, of farming and factorying; the correlation of wind, rain, heat, snow, erosion, fertilization and similar factors with animal, vegetable and human life. Bionomics and economics.

"When any of these variables is too radically upset," explained Vogt, "the whole structure of our life pattern is seriously endangered." It is this uncontrolled imbalancing of nature that he sees as a surer if slower annihilator of mankind than a new kind of superbomb.

F. ACKERMAN

★ ★ NO TIME LIKE THE FUTURE ★ ★

IN 1895 H.G. Wells imagined a time-machine; in 1950 Hobart Swisher built one.

It is a long while since I read Wells' romance of the Chronic Argonauts, and I forget just how far forward they ventured—a million years or more?—pretty near to the end of time, as I recall.

Hobart Swisher was fully as venturesome, but his crude and complex *chronicar* was capable of penetrating the future no farther than 3 years. This, he reasoned, would be enough. By 1953, time-travel principles should be understood sufficiently that he could move ahead say 25 years in an improved model.

And in the year 1978 or thereabouts, he should be able to find a time-machine capable of transporting him a hundred years ahead. After that, the leaps into posterity should begin to multiply by the thousands.

Einstein would be engrossed by an explanation of the operation of Swisher's time-machine, but I doubt that it could be understood by you or me, so I will pass it by. Suffice it to say that the "autimeobile" moved its inventor 'round the clock as a motor car drives a person up the block. At the normal rate it would take him 12 hours to proceed from noon to midnight, but he could

speed that up as a pedestrian may cover miles in minutes by stepping into an auto or plane.

So Swisher sat in his hermetically sealed time-traveler and gave it the juice, and 36 months fled in the winking of an eye. I do not mean to imply that he fell asleep and dreamed this; it really happened. He found himself in approximately 1953.

Only the earth was not around, and this was very disconcerting, as you may well imagine. Somehow he seemed to have got transported in space as well as time. There he hung, like a gnat at night in the Yankee Stadium, and all around him was the ghastly silent, incredibly black gulf of interplanetary emptiness.

Then he did a double-take: The largest body in the sky was—Saturn!

Saturn appeared to be about as far away as the moon, if one were viewing our satellite from earth.

Wait a minute!

That was the moon!

What was it doing with a ring around it?

When Swisher dropped back to autumn of 1951 and stopped and bought a newspaper, he learned the explanation of the lunar phenomenon in the headlines:

ATOMIGEDDON AT HAND

That ring around Luna was what used to be the earth, folks, before it was blown up by atom bombs and became a hat band for the man in the moon.

Doc Swisher never told anybody

about his autimeobile; he just got in it, set it for reverse, and didn't stop till he'd been drawn back to the 19th Century: 1890, to be exact.

Back to the Good Old Days!

F. ACKERMAN

ATTENTION STF FANS! DON'T MISS THE BIG NEW 1951 ISSUE OF MARVEL SCIENCE STORIES - A BRAND NEW LINEUP OF TOP-NOTCH STF AUTHORS!



TEMPTRESS OF THE TIME FLOW

by GARDNER F. FOX

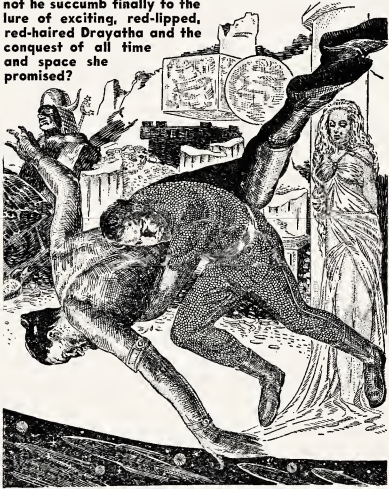


In one swift motion,
Trenton twisted They
downward...

CHAPTER I

TRENTON WAS dead, legally. He stood in the bare room that was filled with a roseate, diffused light. There was a plain desk and chair in the far corner above a dark maroon rug on the floor. Two richly colored prints hung above the room from him. He twisted the

Yes, they'd turned Trenton into a hardbitten space tramp, the breed that beat from Earth to Antares or any other of the seventeen star ports, peddling his disintor of his muscles to the highest bidder Could such a monster be loyal to the lovely, gentle golden girl who wanted peace for the universe? Would not he succumb finally to the lure of exciting, red-lipped, red-haired Drayatha and the conquest of all time and space she promised?



WAS THIS THE END OF THE UNIVERSE? TIMELY, MIND-SHATTERING BOOK-LENGTH SPACE-ADVENTURE NOVEL!

brim of his space cap in nervous fingers.

The girl receptionist came through the door and smiled at him. "The Interrogator will see you now."

Trenton went past her, catching a faint tint of her expensive Venusian perfume. She smiled at him and closed the door as he went into the next room.

"I'm here," Trenton announced. There was a quaver in his voice. He didn't like what they were going to ask him to do. It was an honor, in a way; but as far as he was concerned, they could keep their honors.

The Interrogator looked up from a pile of papers he was fitting into a maroon folder. He was an Earthman, with the deep tan of space on his cheeks and forehead. Auburn hair ringed his bald head. Dark blue eyes lifted from the papers to look at Trenton.

"Sit down, captain. You've been through the Extermination Chamber Office?"

"I'm dead, as far as the world's concerned," said Trenton dully. "They took my papers, bankbook and will. I left a complete resume of my life. I filled out all the forms and signed all the papers."

The Interrogator coughed. "You left a good name behind you, captain. Let's see. Spaceship lieutenant at nineteen. Captain at twenty-three. You smashed the swamp piracies on Mars. You won the Space Medal last year for bravery over and above the call of duty. Right?"

Trenton smiled wryly. "They're mailing it to my sister."

"You don't have a sister any more, captain. Not even a name. It's safest, that way. Then, too, there will be the plastic operation on your face. Anybody special you'd care to resemble?"

Trenton shook his head. He asked hesitantly, "I suppose there's a reason for—all this?"

The Interrogator leaned across the glass top of his *twill* desk. He rasped, "Reason? The best reason in the world. Any minute, any second... our universe is going to puff out of ex-

istence! Is *that* reason enough?"

Trenton managed to laugh. "Puff out? The universe? It's a reason, but—do you really mean that, sir?"

"I'm not in the habit of taking a man's life and identity away from him and making him someone else, captain. I don't hold my job to play at whimsy. I said what I mean and I mean what I said!"

"Yes, sir. Sorry, sir."

The Interrogator waved a hand. "All we know is that the trouble is somewhere in the Majorca region of Procyon-6. You remember Beutel? One of Mars' greatest scientists. He found the trouble, warned us by space-beam, just before the natives got him."

"The natives, sir? You mean the *trolyates*, the dappled race of Procyon's sixth planet."

"I don't mean the *trolyates*. If I had, I'd've said so. I mean whatever Beutel called them in his spacebeam dispatch. We all thought he meant natives. Maybe he didn't. But anyway, they got him."

"You've made other attempts," Trenton said. He stated the words instead of asking a question.

The Interrogator looked at Trenton oddly. He said, "We lost three space-battlers and four cruisers. We rushed land cavalry from Titon. We sent engineers. They never came back."

Trenton gaped at him. "So what in the name of Daneb do you want me to do?"

The Interrogator laughed. "Solve the riddle. The Chiefs think one man could get in, learn where to go, what to be afraid of. If we could only get our men there, to take measurements and graphs! We're like men who know that a bomb is about to explode, but are tied to chairs and so are unable to stop it. You will go, Trenton? The Chiefs say your record is the best one in all the Fleet."

"Yes," nodded Trenton, "I'll go."

THEY SENT him to the surgeons, who did a plastic job on his face. Then he was shipped over to the psychiatric ward where mental experts took a dozen charts of him, hypnotized him, fed him full of

planned neural-reaction impulses and turned him out—a different man.

He was surprised, seeing himself in a mirror after they were through with him. He was looking at a total stranger. He was seeing a hardened space tramp, the kind that beat from Earth to Antares or any other of the seventeen star ports, peddling his *disintor* or his muscles to fight pirates or alien soldiers. He was big and heavily muscled; they hadn't taken his body from him but they'd toughened it, made him bigger and stronger. His face was rugged, and rutbless brown eyes stared at his reflection. Trenton felt a pulse of fear ripple in him.

What would be be like—this different Trenton?

The Interrogator walked around him, nodding. "No one will know you. You can call yourself what you want. They've done a fine job. One of their best!"

Trenton laughed harshly. "I'm different. I'm not the careful, trained officer I was. I feel bubbly, like champagne. I could even—betray you."

The Interrogator was serious. "I know. It's a risk we have to take. But we have to do it this way. We don't know what we're up against. We feel a tough character would have a better chance. If he has any chance at all!"

They put him on a fast freighter booked for Majorca Port. He was listed as a worker, but they gave him books to study and a couple of *disintors* to play with, and a giant of a Martian to keep the fat off his six-foot frame. When he hit Procyon-6, he was as solid as bedrock. His eyes were keen and his brain was sharp, and he could split a bird on the wing with the blue *disintor*.

Smoke curled up, blue and thin, from the red tip of a *glowette*. The girl with the red hair and the transparent thing that passed for a dress in the Majorca Port tavern laughed hoarsely. Her blue eyes glittered.

"Three weeks hunting in the slums, and you haven't found it yet," she mocked him.

Trenton grinned wolfishly. "I'll find it. Somebody knows what happens to our engineers. Somebody has to send them—wherever they go."

The woman blew smoke at him. Her mouth twisted amusedly. She asked, "What can you offer for—information?"

Trenton laughed inside his ribs, but he made his face as wooden as the painted tokens hung on the walls of the tavern. He turned and watched the gyrations of the nearly naked dancer atop one of the *barrus*-wood tables. When he spoke, it was out of the corner of his mouth. "What do you want?"

She ran a hand up her other bare arm. She whispered, looking at the dancer. "Safe transportation back to Earth."

Trenton lifted his eyebrows. "You're a star-deport? What bounced you off Terra? Drugs? A man?"

"Never mind the details," she whispered harshly. "Do you want the information? Beutel used to come in here once in a while for a few glasses of *procystal*. He took one too many, one night. I helped him to his apartments. A drunk man tells you a lot of things."

She looked around at the crowd fearfully. "If anyone knew about it, they'd find me without eyes and tongue on the Hell Desert out beyond the Port. I've been so scared—"

"Yeah, yeah. Forget your worries. I'll deal with you. Nobody'll know. I'll write you an order on the Commandant. Take it to him. He'll fix you up with a new wardrobe and a compartment on the *Star Queen*."

Her blue eyes drank him up. A flush of color came into the powdered whiteness of her cheeks. "You'll do all that?"

"For the right information."

The woman leaned across the wooden table. "Play up to me. I'll tell you on the way...but you have to convince these people...there may be spies. Funny things have happened since Beutel kicked off."

She was pretty. It wasn't too hard to do what must be done, to convince the spacemen and dappled trol-

yates that Trenton was getting high on the *procytal*. In the middle of a long kiss, Trenton kicked back his chair and lifted the woman to her feet.

"Le's go," he muttered, and flung a handful of bills on the wet top of their table.

They staggered out into the cold night as a burst of drunken laughter followed them.

TRENTON went by flier as far into the desert as he dared. He shoveled sand on the ship and left it just another dune. He went on foot into the blinding inferno of heat and sand, a water carafe and a packet of food capsules tucked in his belt.

He threw his compass away when he saw the black splotch on the horizon, two days later.

It hung low, like a black sail bellying in the wind. All around it, like the frame for a black negative, stood the ruined columns and tumbled stone blocks of an ancient Thaman temple. Six thousand years ago, a lost race had worshipped and sacrificed to its forgotten gods, among those ornamented columns and porticoes. Now the white pillars were bare of paint, smooth and rounded as by a million sandstorms. And beyond the white platform, as if balanced on its edge, stood the black splotch.

Its blackness quivered and shifted, like a hole cut in space that was torn by the terrible storms that whipped between the stars. It whispered sibilantly, as if linen were being stroked across linen.

Trenton went up the tumbled steps and onto the broad white platform. He approached very close to the billowing splotch.

He called softly, "I've come from Beutel. Can you hear me—over there?"

There was no answer. He had scarcely expected any, but he had made the effort. The redhead in the tavern told him that once in a while the *other ones* watched the black hole, that once in a while they showed themselves. They had shown themselves to Beutel: had shown themselves and told him things.

That was why Beutel let go of himself with the *procytal*.

The redhead had told him, "Beutel says they can cross from the other side, but not from our side. If you were to attempt to go through, you'd be snuffed out. By what? Only Beutel knew and he didn't tell me. Even when he was drunk, he was afraid to say why. He only whispered once, 'To think it's only that. All along our concepts were wrong. It isn't the way we think it is at all. It's entirely different!' That's what he'd say."

And that was all the talking the redhead would do, though Trenton fed her all the rare Pakaris '79 that she could down.

Trenton walked around the ruined temple. He took out his *disintor* and flipped off the safety catch and holstered it. He smoked a *glowette* until he burned the flesh on his fingertips. He waited.

SOMEONE from over there would see him, if he waited long enough.

He saw the face just as the huge, whitish mass of Procyon dropped toward the horizon. The blackness stirred and swirled, and there was a cowl of some dark material; and under the shadow of the cowl, livid brown eyes burning at him, blazing with some strange, urgent message. The face itself was thin and pasty-white, as though touched by the hand of some lingering death.

The lips opened and moved, but there was no sound.

Then the face was gone.

Instead, a girl was stepping through the blotch of blackness, onto the flat, crumbled stone of the archway. She was not as tall as he, by half a foot. Her eyes were violet under long, yellow lashes. Her thick hair was swept in twisted plaits on top her shapely head. A thin white garment, moulded to her body by the breeze, was looped over one white shoulder and down under the armpit of her other arm. It was girdled by a thin belt of golden links.

She whispered, staring at him, "You are one of them, aren't you? Like Leibel and Cravath? Mani said

you were. . ."

Leibel and Cravath were fleet men. Commanders, both of them. Trenton had known them, and served under Cravath in his lieutenantancy. He said swiftly, "I know them. Where are they? What took them? What—?"

"Drayatha has them," the girl said. A cloud of hate rested on her face at mention of that name, then faded. "She took them as she took others who find this Blotch. Those she cannot use, she destroys. She has killed many. You see, Drayatha is Min-dir, and heiress to the Altar. She hopes to use the Altar to make herself the mightiest weapon ever devised."

She paused a moment, put a hand to her yellow hair. She smiled, "I am Kiryla, of the Llinana-kir. We are the people of the hilltops. We grow food and make clothing for the Min-dir."

Trenton said softly, "So Drayatha has them." He saw the hate-mist cloud her violet eyes again.

"Yes! She and bloody Theg. They have the people of your race. One by one they captured them, as they came to explore the Clot. Beutel first. After him, those who came seeking him."

Trenton took out a *glowette* and lighted it. Blowing smoke, he watched the shadows of the temple columns lengthen along the tumbled stones. He asked, "Is there any way to—help them?"

Kiryla brooded, thrusting her lower lip outward, lowering her long lashes. "No way, unless you rouse the Llinana-kir."

He faced her; asked again, "Will you help me rouse them?"

The girl faced him calmly. The violet eyes clouded with the raw hate in their depths. Her voice cracked as she whispered, "I will help you. Kiryla will do what she may—and Kiryla has power! Only by overthrowing the Min-dir can we strike at the Altar. At Drayatha and her Altar."

"An altar? She's worshipped, then. Like a goddess?"

Kiryla smiled, and the twisting of her lips made Trenton shudder. "The Altar is what makes—that!" Her

hand gestured at the black blotch. "She calls it a weapon."

Puzzled, Trenton followed her up the flat stones. She put out her hand, wrapped warm fingers around his. "Step swiftly. Mani will help us. Come. . ."

It was like going through a dark cloud. Just one step forward, and the ruined Thaman temple was gone, and all around them were green fields and browsing goats. A ring of fir trees towered in the distance, forming a dark green band that wound up over the hill. Higher up, where faint traces of snow still lingered, there were slender buildings of sedge color. They resembled, to Trenton's eyes, nothing more than the flat, long dwellings of the ancient Martians.

Kiryla lifted a tiny golden whistle to her lips; blew lilting notes from it. She dropped the whistle and smiled, "The Llinana-kir will come soon. They will come and take us to their stronghold. There we will plan, with Mani."

THE LLINANA-KIR were tall men, straight of back and muscular of arm and leg. They rode an animal unlike any Trenton had ever seen. It seemed a cross between a horse and a gazelle. Four-legged, its shapely head was a bloom with sharp, ugly horns. Its tail was stumpy, and hung with leathern thongs at the ends of which were attached circular knives.

A half-naked man spoke to Kiryla in a bubbling language that consisted of trills and vowels. For the first time, Trenton realized that Kiryla had spoken to him in his own tongue. As the man swooped from his saddle and waved Trenton toward it, the Earthman smiled at Kiryla, "What speech is that?"

Kiryla laughed, "It is the common tongue that evolved out of the past. Some of it is your language, some Martian, some Procyonic. We are taught dead languages here. That is why I know—yours."

Trenton grinned, "Dead language? I'm as alive as you, and fifty billion people where I come from speak it better than I do."

Kiryla thrust out her lower lip, brooded at him sadly. She shook her head until the golden plaits shook loose. "I was born seven thousand centuries after you, man of Beutel's race. The year is—as you reckon time—703,172...anno Domini."

Trenton staggered, closed a hard hand down on the metal pommel of the leather saddle. "Seven hundred thousand—you're joking."

"Mani will tell you," Kiryla laughed. "He will reveal everything to you. Of the Llinana-kir, Mani is the wisest. He knows everything."

Trenton lifted himself into the saddle on the *jelafaf*, gathered up the reins. The Llinana-kir ranged themselves in single file, jabbed at their mounts' flanks with sandaled heels. The *jelafafs* were light and sure of foot, and fast as the fleetest Martian sea bottom-deer. The wind whipped around Trenton's browned cheeks, played easily across the leather of his space-jacket. His holstered disintor bobbed on his thigh.

They flashed up over the brow of the hill, heading for the upper reaches of the mountain. Kiryla called over to him, "We go fast lest the Min-dir raid us. Since Drayatha rules, they needed—amusement."

Up here, the firs grew fantastically tall, verdured dark-green, towering into low-scudding clouds. Beneath their far-spread branches the Llinana-kir raced their mounts. Over needle-strewn forest floor their hooves flew. Into the scented coolness of mountain woods they ran.

Trenton saw the chalet a mile away, low and green, with wide windows and broad chimneys. Its shape and color harmonized with the broad, low bushes that clustered beside it. From the air, it was hidden by the giant firs.

A man in a green cloak came out of the wide doorway, stood looking at the file of racing *jelafafs*. He lifted a white hand to throw back the cowl. Serene of face, he stood silent and still, waiting. Without knowing, Trenton felt him to be Mani.

Kiryla cried out, "Wise one! I have come—with a member of the ancient race. I found him on the

other side of the Clot, as you foretold."

Trenton swung down from the saddle. He stepped toward the old man, found himself staring into old eyes that twinkled with understanding and merriment. Mani said, making a polite gesture with his hand, "Take welcome here, man. We have much—and little."

Trenton said, "I have come for Beutel, to find the danger he discovered. To cure it by ending it, if I can."

Mani smiled wearily. "The danger is Drayatha. And the Altar. What it is—only she and Theg know. Except that it has to do with—Time."

Trenton looked his surprise. "Time?"

"Time, yes. The hours and the days and the years. What do your people say of Time? Do they say it is a force, a living thing that eats at the bowels of men and machines?"

"Rot," Trenton said, without thinking.

Mani went on gravely, "What makes metal in water rust? Not the water, for if that alone did it, then all metal in all water would rust. Oxidation, you will say. But something must be added to metal and water. Time must be added. Time and metal and water equal rust. Is it not so? You agree. Then time is a force, a catalyst."

Trenton shook his head dazedly. "Time—a force."

"It is hard to believe. It changes your concepts. Think of Time as a flow of energy, measured by clocks and watches, sun-dials and burning candles. Drayatha would tap that flow of energy, build herself and the Min-dir strange weapons that would use all time as their fuel. A weapon with such energy behind it—would be the greatest ever invented by a human race."

"What would Drayatha conquer?" wondered Trenton.

"All history," said Mani softly. "You and your civilization among—others. If Time is a flow of energy, perhaps Drayatha could reverse it, move backward in it. Conquer. Capture. Make herself and the Min-dir great."

The tired old eyes studied Trenton. Mani gathered his green cloak tighter around his thin shoulders. He smiled wryly, "Stop Drayatha. Stop her—if you can."

CHAPTER II

RED LIGHT flickered over his eyeballs. A hot torch touched his chest. Trenton rolled over, sat up. The flames were high, leaping about whiteness, swirling. The flames were not fire, but hair. Red hair. And the whiteness was a face.

"He stirs, Theg. Touch him again with your blade."

Trenton saw a red gash in his chest where a swordpoint had cut. He looked away from it toward the red of the woman's hair. At the red of her sultry mouth. At the slant eyes where green orbs glinted with amusement. A mailed skirt, slit up the legs and thonged with scarlet leather and a plasticine bolero gave her a raffish look.

Drayatha. Her face was lovely and—

Evil!

She laughed into his eyes, mockingly. She said, "Theg!"

A big man with a growth of black beard lumbered from the shadows flung by the little campfire. A naked sword glistened in his hairy paw. He put it toward Trenton, thrust down.

With his wrist, Trenton hit the sword, turned it away. He rolled suddenly from his pine-needle bed, hit the big man's ankles hard and dumped him. Theg was a giant, but Trenton was a mountain catling. Trenton was astride the blackbeard then, turning him with a twist of his arm that made the joint rasp in its socket. Trenton wrapped browned legs about the man's middle and locked them. The muscles stood out on his naked biceps.

"I can break his arms easily," he told Drayatha who was staring at him with surprise and a cruel delight in her green eyes.

"Break them," she taunted him. "Then when they are mended, I'll give you to Theg for his—entertain-

ment. Theg is not as subtle as I. He—hurts."

It was checkmate. Trenton could see Kiryla and three of the Llinana-kir in the shadows under the tall pines, ringed by Min-dir cavalrymen. Their arms were tightly bound. In the distance, where Mani's house had stood on the hillside, was a chaos of red flame and ruin. He wondered whether the old man lay in that fire, a blackened cinder.

Drayatha smiled. "I have my spies. When I learned that Mani and Kiryla were entertaining a man of the past, I hurried as swiftly as my *jelafaf* could carry me. You see, the Llinana-kir are not proper hosts for a man like you. Only the Min-dir can be that."

"I prefer the Llinana-kir."

"Let Theg up. If you are stubborn—"

Drayatha shrugged her white shoulders. Her green eyes glittered. She was amused, because she held the top cards. Trenton knew that one of the Min-dir could blow the top of his head off, from the shadows under the firs.

He rolled off. Theg got to his feet and shook himself. His dark eyes were pits of smouldering rage. He growled, "Give him to me, Drayatha. I've never asked for anything. Just that. Him!"

Drayatha touched the big man's arm with her fingertips. Theg drew back as she stepped forward. She came close to Trenton, looked up into his hard brown eyes.

"This man interests me, Theg. I've never seen anyone do that to you. If he could down you, he might do—other things. We need a man to help us, Theg."

"Not him," the giant rasped. Trenton saw the bitter hate that had been born of a shattered pride. Trenton grinned at him and the veins stood out on Theg's neck as he fought for control.

"Who are you, man of beyond?" Drayatha asked.

"Nobody," said Trenton, remembering the Extermination Chamber and the Interrogator vaguely, as something glimpsed afar off, in a forgotten dream. "Just a star-tramp.

A hireling. My *disintor* goes to the highest bidder."

Drayatha made a moue with her red mouth, head aslant, green eyes roving his hard face, the span of his shoulders, the muscled frame of him. His clothes were plain and unmarked: a plain space-jacket and slacks, tightly fitted to his body. The *disintor* hung by a worn leather belt in a well-oiled holster.

"I'll bid for you, then!" the girl laughed softly. The blood thrummed in Trenton's ears at the odd allure of it. "A thousand *tolans*. In solid platinum! There! Will you wear my Snake?"

Her white fingers lifted a silver serpent, cunningly wrought and carved, that hung by a gossamer chain between her breasts. The snake-eyes were carbuncles, glittering coldly. But the green eyes laughing silently up at him were warm, alive.

THERE WAS something that Trenton should remember, something out of his past: a duty to be performed. There had been an Interrogator, yes. That much he faintly recalled. The Interrogator had sent him on a mission. But there had also been a white-walled room: a psychiatric ward. Men in spotless uniforms had worked on his mind a long time, in that dream. Before he went into that room he had been honored, proud to hold his head up. Now—

Now he did not know. It was as if a stranger had slipped into the muscles of him, along the veins and the arteries, into the very nerves themselves. Only one thing stood out. His name.

"I am Trenton," he murmured dazedly. His eyes went past Drayatha, sought and found the golden Kiryla. She stood proudly, chin upthrust. Her eyes blazed fire at him.

And Trenton sneered at her look. He felt bubbly, exhilarated. No woman could tell him what to do! He was a nobody, a sword-seller.

"I'll take your bid," he said to Drayatha. "You won't regret it."

She put out a hand, ran it along his hard forearm. Trenton tingled

as her fingers lingered. She whispered mockingly, "I'd better not!"

Drayatha swung about, clapped soft hands. Her cavalymen leaped to saddles, jerked on the ropes that held their captives. "We ride to Min-dir! At the gallop. Mani escaped us—as usual! Next time we ride, we'll get him."

The Min-dir waited impatiently as Kiryla and the captured Llinana-kir mounted on their own *jelafafs*. The cavalymen shouted oaths, reined in rearing mounts. Then they were off, and Trenton watched the dirt leap and drop beneath the pounding hooves.

He turned to Drayatha, found her brooding into the distance, lower lip outthrust petulantly. She felt his eyes on her, slid her own eyes sideways, impishly.

"We're in enemy territory, Trenton. The Llinana-kir hate the Min-dir. A roving band of hunters might—attack us."

Trenton touched the smooth handle of his blue *disintor*. It was an unconscious gesture. They hadn't overlorded his subconscious. A man trained to battle would seek reassurance from the hang of his weapon. The move raised him a notch in Drayatha's eyes.

She laughed, "Would you like to see the Altar, Trenton? My Altar? I'll show it to you."

The blood pounded in his veins, hearing that. That was his mission—to destroy the Altar! It threatened his world, the world wherein he had dreamed. He cried out hoarsely, "Show me."

Drayatha swung up into a jewelled saddle, swayed to the curvetting of her dappled *jelafaf*. Her green eyes mocked him. "Do you know what the Altar is, Trenton? You are eager, but you cannot know, unless Mani told you. Did he?"

Trenton shook his head, swinging into the leather saddle, heeling his saddler forward. They loomed dark and brooding to one side of him, never taking his eyes from Trenton's hands.

Drayatha said softly, "The Altar has a history. To understand it, you must know that history. We are

part of what was once the Earth Empire. Thousands of centuries ago a little planet called the Earth discovered how to travel in space. They send their ships throughout their own solar system, then into other systems."

Trenton nodded. He knew all this. That dream of his—they hadn't taken away his knowledge at any rate. He smiled, "That Empire lasted for at least seven thousand years. I was in the employ of—the Fleet—a long time ago."

"How long ago even you can't imagine, Trenton. That Earth Empire lasted two hundred thousand years. Their spacers sent luxuries to all corners of the universe. From Deneb to Sirius, their colonists built cities. And then the reaction came. Too much ease of living, too much of everything. The people decayed. Only on the outermost planets of the systems, where there still remained animals and savages to fight, did the men retain their manhood.

"THE EMPIRE degenerated. It took fifty thousand years, but after that, there was no Empire. Only planet-states remained. Cut off from Earth, dependent on themselves for support. Here on Procyon, a bloody revolution began. It was a glorified civil war, between men and the robots that served them. For thousands of years the battle went on. Great scientists on both sides were killed. The people took to living in caves. Fighting on the run. Cooking when they could.

"The humans had one advantage. They could propagate. To one of the scientists a child was born who was destined to be the greatest scientist the Min-dir ever knew. His name was Nannar-kir. He found a way to smash the robots, to set up organization and a sort of culture. He recognized two basic types of people: those who worked in the air, those who worked in confinement. The farmers, the hunters, the builders—to them he gave the wide spaces of the planet, with a duty to hunt and feed and clothe the others. To the scientists, the clericals, the

business men—he gave the cities. The Llinana-kir and the Min-dir.

"Before he died, Nannar-kir discovered Time. He found out that it was a force, a living, vital thing. Frightened, he locked his discoveries away in the Altar. But he left the key with his son, to be handed down to his son's sons. And to make doubly sure that they would not be tempted beyond their means to resist, he placed the Altar in the heart of the Llinana-kir's lands."

The hooves of the *jelafats* pounded across scrub-spotted plains. In the distance a new fringe of mountains flung their fir-topped breasts at a cloud-pocked sky. Drayatha lifted a white arm and pointed at the firs.

"Over there, Trenton. In those mountains. That is where the Altar is. For a long time the Llinana-kir and the Min-dir were friends. But with the passage of the centuries—a/e, there were many centuries to follow Nannar-kir before Drayatha!—the Min-dir and Llinana-kir grew apart. Jealousies. Murders. Hate grew. Now all that keeps Min-dir and Llinana-kir from each other's throat is—my power!"

Trenton saw the pride that etched itself on the girl's face, saw the lift of her breasts beneath the plasticine bolero.

Trenton said drily, "If you have so much power—and the Altar—what's stopping you?"

"The Altar is locked—locked in Time! A/e, if the Altar were all mine—everything would be mine. Trenton! With the Altar goes godhood! But Nannar-kir was wise. He enclosed the Altar in a sheath of Time itself. When that sheath wears off, then the Altar will be open to me. And when that day comes—"

Drayatha broke off, urged her mount closer to Trenton. Her hand rested on his naked forearm. She breathed, "Be my man, Trenton. Then when my day comes, you can have what you will. Anything!"

Her eyes were promising pools, uplifted to his. Trenton let himself sink in them, slid down into the verdant coldness that sparkled, changed to bright green flames, to fire. His

arms were out, half-raising her from the saddle, crushing her against his chest. He mocked her, looking into those hot eyes, "You promise what you can't give, Drayatha. What are you afraid of? You promise when you should demand. You hear me? Demand—like this!"

His mouth burned on hers in a savage kiss. Faintly he heard Theg bellow; felt Drayatha stiffen, lift both arms to fight him off. And then—suddenly—she was limp, returning his kiss with both arms locked about his middle.

He let her go, still watching her eyes. He murmured, "Why are you promising, Drayatha? Why can't you—demand?"

She shuddered. She whispered, "The Llinana-kir! If ever they united against me—my Min-dir ealvary would be like leaves on a windswept hilltop! That's why I need you, Trenton—because the girl Kiryla—loves you!"

Trenton grinned. Drayatha slid her eyes sideways at him, sullenly. She spat, "She does! She does! I saw it in her eyes when she looked at you. She'd do anything for you! Even to—urging the Llinana-kir to—aid me when the Altar comes free of the Time sheath. The Llinana-kir worship her. She's the last descendant of the old nobility that chose to go out with the hunters and farmers rather than stay with the scientists in the cities. They look up to her, do what she tells them. Is love stronger than hate, Trenton? Her love for you—would she ally her Llinana-kir to you as you allied yourself with me? I wonder!"

They rode on, up the fir-clad slopes, along the stony ridges.

THE ALTAR burst on them as they came out of a clump of aspens. It was long and low and flat, with spires at the four ends, and a faery delicacy in the stonework around the sides. It was architecture of a thousand planets and a hundred thousand years. It combined Martian motif with Proeyonic execution. Earthen roof with Sirian towers. It took away the breath with beauty, and returned it with simplicity.

Trenton rubbed his eyes, looking at it. The longer he looked, the stronger became the blur that surrounded the Altar. It quivered and shook and—was still. It was a haze, a mist, a fog. It shrouded and it revealed.

Drayatha whispered, "The Time sheath. The Altar is there, but we see it through the sheath. Some day—soon—the haze will go. Then I'll enter it, Trenton. Then the whole course of history will—be mine!"

Trenton scowled, looking at her. He muttered, "But the Blotch! Mani said—"

Drayatha shrugged. "There is a miniature Altar in Min-dir. It permits contacts with the past and future. It made the Blotch, which is in reality only a Time-bridge between your world and mine. But the model is not as strong as the true Altar. It's only a toy."

Trenton held out his hand, grinning; baring strong white teeth against the tan of his face. A toy? By Deneb, but a toy would fit his hard palm. He curled his fingers and squeezed.

Four times had the sun lifted and set beyond the sprawling white city of the Min-dir. From the chambers hung with golden cloth and platinum rods that Drayatha had given him, Trenton brooded over a crystal goblet of *frothla*. Four days, three nights. And no nearer to the Altar than when Kiryla had found him!

He swept the goblet from the metal table; heard its musical *tinkle-akkle* as it crashed on the tilings. He put his big hands to his forehead and pressed.

He groaned, "They did too good a job on me! I—I can't remember much, any more. The dream is fading. There was an Interrogator—I was a Fleet officer, hand-picked for a job. To find out what was behind the Blotch and—smash it."

"They sent me to the psych ward. That was a mistake, because they gave me a different personality and—"

"I'm afraid of it!"

Trenton got to his feet. He could see his big body reflected from a

wall glass: brown of face and body, big-muscled. A close-cropped head, and a tight mouth. Hard brown eyes, that slanted slightly—cruelly! He sneered at the white stuff girding his loins, at the cloak dependent from his jerkined shoulders. He should be wearing leather and battle-sandals.

The door opened behind him. Trenton did not turn, but a stray gust of wind carried past his nostrils. Perfume: Drayatha's sweet stuff. Knowing her eyes were on him, he posed and preened before the glass; preened and walked and—

Leaped!

His hands caught and lifted her, held her helpless in that first flush of surprise. His right hand was at her white throat, fingers sinking into the soft white flesh. Her green eyes flared at him.

"Drayatha! The Llinana-kir fear you. The Min-dir worship you, but they're afraid, too. One man does not fear you, Trenton!"

"Let me go," she hissed. "I'll have you—"

His fingers tightened. She coughed, choked. "No threats, witch! Or your neck snaps—*crack!*" He laughed and let her go suddenly. She staggered and almost fell. Her cheeks were white.

"I should have killed you," he told her evenly. "Killed you and destroyed your Altar! Part of me tells me that. And another part of me—a part that is growing daily stronger—"

The woman laughed and stretched. She whispered, thrilling to the gleam of his dark eyes, "What does the strong part of you say, Trenton?"

He turned away toward the white roofs of the city sprawling below his balconied windows. He fought for control, fought to hold back the seething pride and force inside him.

A soft hand slid over his arm. A voice whispered. "Let me tell you, Trenton. The other part says—take this woman. Take her and rule her—and her Altar! Be a conqueror beside whose name the sound of Napoleon and Kravman and Yoll are babies' lisplings!"

FAINTLY, up from below, a harp's strings twanged. Their melody was rich and heady, gay and resonant. Those strings plucked matching chords deep inside Trenton's chest; plucked and strummed and roused the sleeping dreamer.

"Kiryla!" he said softly. "She's the answer to the whole thing. Through her, I can win over the Llinana-kir. You said so yourself, witch."

The redheaded Drayatha dug sharp nails into his naked arm. She hissed, "By Yoll! I offered you myself—not her. The Altar is mine. Mine, Trenton! It can be yours only if you—belong to me!"

He laughed harshly, freely. The dream was fading faster, faster. No more a man with a mission; instead, a freebooter who took what his own strong hands closed on.

He reached out and caught the redhead. He whispered into her mouth. "I belong to no one, Drayatha. Take me to Kiryla. After that—" His mouth burned hers. Drayatha sighed, stirred free.

"Come," she told him.

Kiryla was alone in the fountain-dotted garden when Trenton entered, waving Drayatha aside. She was bent above a shallow pool, idly making ripples. Whirling at his footsteps, she flung back her yellow head; eyed him coolly.

She was silent, proud. A pulse hammered where her throat met the first swells of her breasts.

Trenton said, "I've come to you. I've been lucky. I've had to act a part and I did."

That roused her, brought her to her feet, both hands trembling, reaching out to his. She whispered, blue eyes hunting his features. "You've changed! They—*she* did something to you."

He shook his head irritably. "No, no! Not changed. I managed to see you alone, like this. Can we escape? Is there any way?"

Her lips were sad. "No one ever escaped from Drayatha."

"What about—the toy Altar?"

"Zann! It's a way, of course—but a dangerous one. You see, the Altar is well guarded and—oh, it's stupid

even to think of it."

"Go on! Guards. What else?"

"It's a long path from the Altar to the hill country of the Llinana-kir. The Altar deepens into a long tunnel bored a thousand centuries ago by Nannar-kir's orders. The tunnel leads past depths that—border on—on madness. Beasts. Perhaps renegade Min-dir."

"And beyond the tunnel?"

She laughed softly. "If we win out of the tunnel, Mani will find us."

Trenton nodded. There was a way—winning Mani and the Llinana-kir to his banner, taking Kiryla for his own. And—the Altar!

Kiryla shivered, staring up at him. "You frighten me, Trenton, when your eyes blaze yellow-brown like that. They are cold and hard. Ruthless!"

He smiled down at her. She nestled against him, blushing. She whispered, "I liked you the way you were when I first saw you."

He tilted up her chin with a fingertip. "And—as I am now?"

She looked deep into his eyes and nodded.

"Good. Be here tonight at the hour of the Snake. I'll get away, come for you. Be ready!"

Lifting his eyes suddenly, Trenton caught a glimpse of red hair behind a *prayathus*-bush; a glimpse of red hair that could have been only an excited imagination, or—Drayatha!

CHAPTER III

TRENTON lifted himself from the perfumed cushions. Drayatha lay beside him, red hair sprayed fanlike about a white pillow. Her red mouth mocked, and lured.

"You are restless, Trenton. Am I not sufficient—entertainment?"

Trenton grinned. His eyes swept the clinging gown that scarcely hid her white body. In the pale candlelight, she was a goal that tugged at him with fierce bonds. He had tasted her kisses, had heard her whispered love-words. And yet—

Kiryla was waiting.

He rolled from the low divan, went and poured green *frothla* from a golden carafe. He tilted his head and let the hot liquor slide down his throat. He picked up another goblet, half-filled it with the potent fluid. Back turned to the woman, he moved his hand, flipped grains of white powder in the drink.

He carried the goblet to the cushions.

Drayatha threw a white arm around his neck. Her green eyes blazed into his. She whispered, "Is the drink—for me, Trenton?"

"For you, Drayatha."

She put out a hand and took the bowl. Smiling at him—a chill thought came to Trenton that she smiled in mockery—she put the goblet to her lips and drank.

Lying back, she tossed the beaker from her. It rattled and bounced on the floor. She smiled, wriggled white fingers at him, beckoning.

"Come to me, Trenton. Kiss me, as you did before..."

In the midst of the caress, he felt her stiffen in his arms. Her eyes rolled back. A little froth gathered at the corners of her mouth. She murmured, "I am...not well. I thirst. Give me...water...water..." Her head fell sideways, weakly. Her eyelids closed.

Trenton pressed ear to her chest, heard the muffled beating of her heart. She would sleep well, would Drayatha, while he and Kiryla fled to the Llinana-kir. He stepped from the divan, ran across the room, pulled back the curtains.

The corridors were empty. Only in the outer rooms would there be guards. And Trenton would not pass through those. He ran down an intersecting hall, stepped through a door. A cool breeze touched his cheek, ruffled the hair on his head. Closing the door, he ran impatient eyes about the garden.

Kiryla came forward from behind a scarlet *dictalos* shrub. She was draped in a black cloak, her yellow hair glimmering above it. Her violet eyes searched his face.

He caught her hand, avoiding her eyes. "We'll have to hurry. I don't know how long that drug will hold

Drayatha. Remember, if we meet anyone, we're sweethearts. We stepped outside to kiss."

He thought of Drayatha in her perfumed cushions. Ha! It was hard to leave her, but Trenton was playing for big stakes!

No one stopped them. The streets were almost deserted under the silver light of the twin moons. They ran surely but silently on furred sandals. Kiryla guided them. She had been to Min-dir City before, many times. Bringing food and furs, she told Trenton. Once Mani had come with her, taken her to the threshold of the Little Altar and let her see the dim recesses of the Temple.

THEY PASSED men drunk with green *frothla*, and painted women who attended banquets for the Min-dir nobles. No one bothered them. No one even seemed to notice them, so intent were they on their own affairs.

And then, so abruptly that he had to put out a hand to Kiryla's shoulder to steady himself, he almost ran into the man he had seen in the Blotch. The same thin white, dying face was shadowed by the cowl of his cloak, and the blazing brown eyes still burned with frantic zeal. Trenton tried, for a split moment, to read what the man was trying to tell him with his eyes. And could not.

Then the man was gone, and the way to the Temple was clear before them. Against the sheer, straight bluff of a mountainside. The polished black walls of the Temple stood like a black basalt block. Square and hard it was, with an arched doorway of hand-carved metal.

And in front of the door, two guards.

Trenton fumbled in the belt that girdled his lean waist, lifting out the blue *disintor*. He took quick aim as he ran. Bright globules of amethyst fire swept from the nozzle; swept like burning hailstones, to hit and devour the guards before they could lift their own weapons.

He pushed Kiryla ahead of him into the pale darkness of the Temple.

They stood arm to arm, breathing softly, ears straining. They heard no sound.

"Now," he whispered, and turned.

It was like a slap in the face from a woman who has kissed you with hunger in the set of her mouth. Trenton had not expected this. He stood, staring; while Kiryla put her hand over her mouth and shrank against him.

A glowing globe of transparent blue glass, stretched so thin it was merest film. Hazy with the opalescent light, hiding the dainty filaments and delicate tentacles stretched from moon-arc of tissue-thin metal to glittering ovoid: all inside the globe.

And the globe suspended in space between the high arched stone ceiling and the flat space of black basalt, like an altar.

And in the strange ceruleous light—

Drayatha!

She stood straight and proud, still in the revealing film of her dressing gown. Her green eyes mocked, taunted. At her right was Theg, a thin *coalsor* lifted toward the two by the tall door. At her right were half a hundred warriors, Min-dir cavalrymen.

Drayatha laughed.

"Come forward to my Altar, Kiryla of the Llinana-kir. Come you also, Trenton."

He thrust Kiryla behind him, with the half-formed notion of blasting with his *disintor* at the redhaired woman who laughed at him, of blasting until he fell, and taking Kiryla with him. And then that new and deadly part of him whispered, *Fool! Play your cards. You sold your sword, so why not use it?*

Trenton straightened, grinned. He came down the long, dim distance of the Temple floor, walking toward the bluish haze. Like a chastened slave, Kiryla followed.

Drayatha seared him with her eyes. "Did you think I was fool enough to be taken in by that powder, Trenton? I'd swallowed its antidote before you filled the goblet. Did you think me so stupid?"

"ON THE contrary," he grinned. "I thought you'd caught on. That you knew what I was doing. That you were playing the game with me, helping me."

Doubt slid into the green eyes. She cocked her head sideways. Under the blue light, the red hair glistened with purple depths. "You're telling me I knew you'd play the traitor?"

Trenton shrugged. "I thought you knew I was taking Kiryla back to the Llinana-kir, to win them to the Snake banners. How else could I go? With trumpets blowing? With a royal blessing? If I'd gone like that, the Llinana-kir'd have pulled me apart between two *jelafafs*!"....

Kiryla gasped, behind him. And Drayatha was plainly puzzled. She said slowly, "If you're telling me the truth, you're a bold rogue. And if you're lying, you act like Tufan himself!"

Trenton hid the savage elation in him. He spread his hands wide. "What other reason would I have? I'm not fool enough to think the Llinana-kir could give me reward enough for bringing Kiryla back to them, to match the reward you could give me!"

It was a bold stroke. Trenton went on, "I thought about it a long time. If I were to go back with Kiryla and help win the Llinana-kir to you, I'd have to make my flight look good. I'd hoped this would be an escape that would wag Min-dir tongues for years. I'd hoped—that you were clever enough to understand."

Drayatha flushed. They brushed forward, the coal/sor shaking in his big hand. "Let me finish them, Drayatha. Two stud-depressings and they'd—"

The back of her hand caught his face, drove him back a step. Drayatha stepped toward Trenton, eyes blazing. "If I thought that was the truth—but no! You could have told me! You would have told me!"

"And you would have told Them—and They might have let his hot head run away with everything you and I planned!"

Drayatha lifted her hands and ran long white fingers through her loosened hair. She brooded at him long, eyes half-veiled. Trenton knew she was judging him in her head, in her heart, in the soft flesh of her scarlet lips. She flung back her head, gestured suddenly.

"Mount the altar! Mount it, I say!"

Kiryla brushed past Trenton, not touching him. She was sobbing into the dark material of the hood. She stepped onto the black block beneath the glistening blue globe. Trenton followed her. He stood with the iridescent beams of the blueness all around him; heard from afar and faintly, the deep music of unearthly regions. He sneered at himself, but the thought came—

Was it the music—of Time itself?

Deep and thunderous arpeggios. Tinkling pizzicatos. A swaying, humming rhythm akin to the roar and sweep of the stars through space, partner to a sun's birth and a planet's cold and dying end. Time!

Drayatha moved forward, staring up at him.

"Trenton," she whispered. "I cannot take a chance! I can't let myself fail now. Soon the real Altar will open to me. I must be ready—strong for it! —when it comes!"

IT WAS almost a question. Trenton grinned, "Be strong for me. You won't kill me. Not yet."

He was tensing his muscles to lift Kiryla, to turn and whirl into the blackness of the tunnel beyond the basalt block. Kiryla had told him of it. As he ascended the block he'd studied it, found the orifice. Once inside that, his blue *disintor* would keep the tunnel clean.

"I do not intend to kill you," Drayatha said. "I am going to free you—give you as my gift—to the endless corridors of Time. I will lose you, lock you in Time itself. When? Where? Who knows? Not I. Only the Altar!"

Trenton felt the force settle around him. His body locked. He tried, and could not move. The deep thunder of the music grew louder

and louder. It beat and hammered in his ears, grew faint and shrill. The blue light deepened. It glimmered and pulsed. Above him the transparent globe was whirling, whirling, whirling. The tissue-thin filaments and wires were glittering brighter and brighter.

The mystery of Time was opening to him, yawning at his feet, reaching up to suck him into its boundless maw. Like a voracious whirlpool, it drew him down and down, into grey haziness that was like a thin black *nylanese* veil wafted by a thousand winds.

Warm in his hand was the hand of Kiryla. He heard her sobbing, felt her shuddering body press to his. "Trenton...Trenton...where is it taking us? I'm frightened, Trenton..."

And then there was peace. The veil was there, but it was still, now; and beyond it, glimpsed faintly, was a rolling meadow. They were a part of that scene, and yet not a part of it. Swiftly across the meadow galloped Min-dir cavalry. So swiftly they went that they were scarcely more than a blurred movement.

The meadow changed its contours. Rocks lifted. Trees fell. The ground swelled and shifted. Ice came and went.

"We're going faster," muttered Trenton. "Time is catching us into its rhythm."

"Where will we end?"

"Beyond Time. At the end of all the planets."

Kiryla whimpered and crept against him. "You mean we'll never get out of this? That Drayatha..."

Trenton chuckled wryly. "Drayatha is dead by now. We must be thousands of years in the future. The Altar is open, by this time. But whether Min-dir or Linana-kir won...who knows?"

A city grew on the meadow before them, lived its span and fell into ruin and decay. Giant vines and creepers grew among the split rocks and twisted monuments. Animals fought and mated and died in the shadows of the metropolis. And then even the stones crumbled and blew away before titanic hurricanes

that blasted trees from the ground, that tumbled debris before it, that caught human figures and whirled them loosely, like leaves, before crushing them against a rock or cliff-wall.

The storms died and went away. New civilizations rose and died. Ages passed, and still Trenton and Kiryla drifted in the flow of time.

ONCE, WHEN Trenton found a queer fascination in studying a new type weapon that was being used in a battle, he fought against the flow of time, fought hard, and checked it: he swayed there, motionless, as time itself went past him.

It gave him an idea. He told Kiryla, "If we can stand and let Time go past us, maybe we could go back into the past, by a little extra effort."

But they found that almost impossible. They went back a little, yes; but the effort drew on their strength and left them weak and gasping. "If we only had some motive force, we might make it," Trenton told Kiryla. But they could not escape from the time flow to find materials.

It was Kiryla who saw Drayatha.

She was seated on a scarlet throne, long red tresses caught up about her shapely head and wound with chains of diamonds and pearls. A cloth of gold skirt was slit up the side, through which protruded her white thigh. Jewel-studded breastplates glittered in the lights of the long hall.

Before her, in chains, stood a dozen men. They wore the white uniform of—Trenton frowned. He knew that uniform. He had seen it before, a long time before...when he was...of course! It was the Fleet uniform! Earth Fleet! And those were space admirals and lesser officers, before her!

He fought against the *nylanese* veil, hammering its nebulosity with maddened fists. Realization came in a flood of bitterness at his stupidity. Drayatha had conquered the Fleet, had taken Earth and Venus, and the other planets of the System! He, Trenton, was more than a failure.

Dimly he understood what was occurring in the great Chamber. The

admirals were captives, taken in a mighty battle by Drayatha. She wanted information that the Fleet officers were refusing. Drayatha stood up, and They came forward. Trenton shuddered, seeing the metal tipped knout that the giant carried. The admirals would be tortured. One or two of them would weaken. Drayatha would learn top-drawer secrets. The disposition of space cruisers and starships. Crew complements. Weaponry.

Kiryla whispered, "She must have come far into the future, Trenton, to have a base of operations here."

Trenton whirled, hands leaping for her shoulders. "Of course! It didn't dawn on me, but that's right. She must have passed us in the time flow, come on to this age, built a citadel here! She's giving us our chance, Kiryla—our chance to—go back!"

Kiryla stared at him blankly.

"Don't you see?" Trenton said impatiently. "If Drayatha came here, she must have some means of locomotion in Time. We need a means like that, Kiryla. It's as simple as taking her means of locomotion away from her!"

They hunted in the *nylanese* mists, with fear and frenzy in their eyes and hearts. This was the one chance they must grasp. There would be no others. Drayatha had come this far into the future to build a citadel of power for herself, a base of operations far removed from chance of reprisal. But once built, she would not go further into the future. Chance was, she had already searched into the misty future, had found it barren, and rejected it.

THEY SEARCHED on, desperate and afraid. From the great black citadel to the forest beyond. Then on to a smoothly flowing river they hunted, wispy beings in the grey stream of time. And then, when they found themselves yielding to the pressure of the mighty imponderable flow of the years—

They saw it!

A queer ship, it was: fitted with fluted vanes jointed to the bright

red hull, with convex discs rising above it in tiered brilliance to a glowing green globe atop a single mast. Two valves gave entry, valves that were locked and bolted. The ship hung motionless in the time flow, held by some invisible force.

Trenton pulled Kiryla after him, buffeting the time-current. He fumbled at his waist, drew out the *stil-sor*. A verdant lance of flame lashed from the barrel; licked once against the lock, ate hungrily through the metal.

A touch of the vaim opened the door.

A narrow corridor framed with metal ridges inset in the *alutistil* wall framed a guard whose eyes bulged at sight of them, whose hand was a second too slow in bringing the *refantor* out of his leather holster.

Trenton came down the corridor in two long bounds, big fist lifting to strike. The guard made a sodden sound as he went into the wall and bounced. Trenton tore his *refantor* from his fingers and handed it to Kiryla.

Trenton walked on. In the control room an engineer was on his back, working over a shattered rheostat. He was removing the electrode plates when he saw them. He lifted his head, blue eyes startling in his blackened face.

"Wha—what do you want? Who're you?"

Trenton said, "The girl is Kiryla of the Llinana-kir. I am Trenton. How many men are here in this ship?"

The young engineer shrugged, slid out from under the barrel of the cylinder. He said, "Just me and a guard. Nobody ever came out of the stream before. You did come from time, didn't you? Thought so. Drayatha keeps her other entrances too well policed."

"Can you operate this thing?"

The engineer looked at Trenton, then dropped his eyes. He shrugged, "I can operate it, but I can't go back beyond the time at which the *time-ler*, this ship, entered the flow. Only Drayatha knows that secret, that she

learned from Nannar-kir. She locks and seals the controls. This *timeler* acts as a ferry between two points. I can return you to our starting point, that is all."

Trenton asked, "How long have we—been gone?"

"Eleven years," said the man, bending to thrust over a lever, to spin a grey dial.

"Is Mani still alive?" whispered Kiryla, her free-flung golden hair shimmering like a golden waterfall.

"Still alive and defiant. The Llinana-kir think you two are Drayatha's prisoners. Mani counselled them to wait, hoping you would escape and return to lead them against her. That was why no resistance was offered when the Altar finally opened. She sent messengers to the hill-country, saying you would die by torture if the Llinana-kir fought her. Mani gave her free access to the Altar. Now she has built a city of the Min-dir around the Altar, built walls to keep out the Llinana-kir, made it her stronghold."

Kiryla whispered, "Trenton, we've failed! She has the Altar and her weapon!"

Trenton growled to the engineer, "Take us back! Put us down in the hills—near Mani's chalet! Hurry!"

The engineer looked at the round muzzle of the *disintor*, shrugged, and put out a hand.

Faintly from within the hull of the *timeler* a machine whirled. Soft susurrations vibrated all about them as the engineer manipulated the controls. There was a whispering as if a breeze shook the leaves of giant trees.

Then—silence.

A LANTERN swung to and fro from the beamed ceiling. Its glow made faint patterns of shadow on the stooped form of old Mani as he piled a crude wooden platter with food. A curtain behind him moved and lifted.

The old man whirled. His hands shook. A wooden spoon slipped from his nerveless fingers to the floor.

"Wha...wha...?"

"Mani! It's Kiryla! Yes, yes, Ma-

ni! I've come back—from the time flow. We weren't prisoners. We were in the time stream!"

Trenton came forward to stand beside her. He told the old man what had happened, how they had tried to escape, been caught and thrown into time itself; of how they had fled from the distant future to the present.

He concluded, "We left the *timeler* in the City of the Altar, came here under cover of night."

The old man listened, touching his lips with a dry tongue. He shook with excitement. He cried, striking gnarled hands together, "Now we can do what he told me—I mean, the time has come to strike at Drayatha! I was worried, no matter what he told..."

"He?" asked Trenton.

Mani shook his head. "I cannot tell you anything about him, except that he comes and goes in some odd manner, that he always wears a black cloak and hood—but he did tell me that he needed you, Trenton, and you, Kiryla, to stop Drayatha!"

Trenton protested, "Stop Drayatha! But she's opened the Altar, used it to power her spacers, to build the *timeler*, to attack Earth! She has her weapon, that terrible motive force that you said was Time itself."

Mani nodded eagerly, "Yes, yes. All that. But there is a way. You see, Time is a weapon beside which an atom explosion is a breath of breeze on a summer day. She has focused that force, has built *timerupters* with it as their power. The trouble is, the *timerupters* are too powerful. She can't use them anywhere but in space itself, against a rival ship or fleet. If she used them on a planet, the resulting blast would blow the planet and everyone on it to spacedust!

"Drayatha learned that the first time she sent a force to attack the Earth empire's outer forts on Pluto. She lost her entire fleet when they fired their *timerupters* at the Earth fort. The planet exploded, took her entire fleet with it. Unfortunately—Drayatha was not with them."

"Go on," prompted Trenton.

"She has beaten Earth Fleet in space combat. She controls the space lanes of the universe. But she cannot land men on Earth or any of the planets. Earth science—outside of the Time force—is far superior to ours. Our science is lopsided. Against a better-balanced adversary, Drayatha is helpless."

Trenton muttered, "Those admirals. She tortured them to try and learn the secret of Earth weapons. Small arms. Atomic blasters and *disintegrators*."

Mani shrugged, "If they talk, Drayatha will be able to arm and equip her armies. She will attack Earth empire on its fringe—conquer slowly—for the Earth cannot send spacers to help its colonies. Drayatha and her *timerupters* would annihilate them."

To Trenton came a picture of the Earth, lying like a trapped animal on a limb: unable to escape, yet safe from immediate attack. Sooner or later, she must leave the limb. And then—oblivion.

Trenton growled, "If there were only some way to strike at her! The Altar is her vulnerable spot. Perhaps an attack on that—"

Mani shook his head slowly. "You would need an army. And Drayatha has armed her Min-dir too well. The Llinana-kir are herders and farmers, not trained soldiers. But there might be a way. With your help—"

"With their help—what?"

Drayatha, a naked white arm bolding the curtain aside, stood in the archway of the little chalet, smiling at them. Behind her, levelled blasters in their hands, were a score of black-clad Time Troopers.

CHAPTER IV

SHE CAME forward, moving like a proud feline. Her green eyes gazed curiously, eagerly at Trenton and Kiryla. Her red mouth quivered amusedly. One white hand she waved at Mani and a Time Trooper stepped around her, dragged Mani from his chair and out of the room.

"Trenton, did you think you could

escape me? You should have killed the engineer. He came back in the *timeler*, told me where you were. I came as swiftly as you."

She broke off, smiling wryly. She moved a little away from him, put a hand to a wooden mug and slid it aimlessly in circles on the bare tabletop. The lantern-light made her white skin transparent. The blue veins under her skin stood forth with delicate tracery. Her green eyes glowed hungrily. She brushed a lock of scarlet hair from her forehead.

"Tell me, Trenton. What was it like?"

He snarled, "You devil's whelp! What happened to the Fleet admirals?"

Her eyes mocked him. "They died, Trenton. Under the knout. They had a good time with them. But they died obstinately. Three of them bit off their tongues. By that time the rest were dead. I will have to make another raid."

He quivered with rage. He put out his hands, but dropped them. Drayatha might die, but her work would go on. And it was her work, the Altar and the *timerupters* and the *timelers*, that were dangerous. Without them, Drayatha was just a woman.

Trenton chuckled, "You could ask me, Drayatha. Nicely. I might talk—for the proper persuasion."

He knew Kiryla was staring at him oddly, her golden brows gathered. He avoided her eyes.

Drayatha laughed softly. "You played that game once before, Trenton. Once burned, twice shy."

He laughed, "You were a fool. As you are now. Always you take the hard road. What's the matter with the easy one? I told you then I was planning to escape in order to help win the Llinana-kir to you. You still don't believe me."

Drayatha dropped the mug. It fell to the floor with a hollow sound, rolling. She came as close to Trenton as she dared. Her little hands made shaking white fists. Her voice whispered, "If only I dared believe you! If only I did! You and I—you as you can be...hard, ruthless...we would rule..."

Trenton whispered, "Ask for proof, Drayatha. How can I convince you?"

Her green eyes flared as though lambent fires danced behind verdant glass. Her mouth made a moue of reflection.

"The most powerful weapon Earth has! A weapon that I can give every man that wears my Snake! Give me diagrams, Trenton. Blueprints to hand my factories!"

"You could go back to Earth in a *timeler* and learn information like that yourself," he said.

"I tried," she admitted ruefully. "I don't know enough of the Earth to let me search quickly. Once I landed on a desert. Once, deep in the ocean. That was a close call, Trenton. The next time the *timeler* dropped on a mountain peak. I almost froze to death. After that—I abandoned those attempts."

Trenton grinned, "And you didn't trust anybody well enough to let him go for you! Always it has to be you. You must hold all the reins of power. The *timeler* controls. Secrets of the Altar, of Time itself. All in your hands."

"It is safest, that way."

She turned, clapped her hands. Two black-clad Time Troopers entered. She gestured at Kiryla. "Take her outside. Put her in a sealed compartment of the *timeler*."

Trenton saw Kiryla turn and stare at him, saw the doubt and the fear in her eyes. Then she turned and went out before the Troopers, her golden head low-hung, shoulders bowed in despair.

Drayatha watched the golden girl leave. Then she whirled on Trenton, lifting her hand savagely, bringing the flat palm of it stinging against his cheek.

Her laughter mocked him. She cried harshly, "Where are you, Trenton? Where is that man that's in you? Find him for me, Trenton! I want him! With him beside me... where is he? Where is he?"

Trenton caught her wrist, but she twisted free. Her green eyes flared. Her red hair lashed about her white shoulders like living fire. She

panted, fighting him, her fingernails slashing his cheeks, cutting flesh.

He knew what she was doing. With her voice and with her hands she was hunting that other self the psychiatrists had made so long ago, back on earth. That different personality, that ghostlike someone who haunted him, who lived inside him. Vaguely he remembered back to the early twentieth century, remembered the fictitious Jekyll-Hyde, the real and living Beauchamp. Other cases—not exactly schizophrenia—but instances such as the Phantom of Bucharest who was the Crown Attorney, the dual personalities of accredited medical history, the wonder of the human brain where saint and criminal was in one body—

He threw her from him. He needed all his senses to save Kiryla. If Drayatha brought his other-self back with his cold arrogance and hunger for power, his self-blade philosophy—

"I'll make the blueprints," he snarled, "I'll make them. Only—leave me alone!"

Drayatha laughed at him. She drew herself up; whispered, "You're afraid, Trenton. Afraid of me... of what I can do to you. You fool! Go to your blueprints. But remember... you will change for me... some day soon! Then the Earth is mine... and yours! Remember, remember!"

He stumbled out after her troopers, head aching, knowing that she spoke the truth.

TRENTON PACED restlessly in the glass-floored room that was his cell. The drapes hung richly golden on three walls. On the fourth was a smooth stretch of black marble with a circular red door. He had finished the blueprints, tossed them in a corner of the room near his sleeping divan.

Soon now, Drayatha would send her Time Troopers for him. They would take the blueprints and—his life.

Trenton chuckled. Let Drayatha have the prints. Let her build weapons with them! Let her troopers try and use them!

"They'll blast themselves to dry powder!" he whispered. "Every one

of those prints calls for a gun that will—backfire!"

A step sounded on the glassine flapping. Trenton whirled.

The man in the black cloak! The man whose face he had seen in the Blotch, and again in the streets of Min-dir-City when he and Kiryla had fled toward the temple! His face was white and lined, old. The deepset brown eyes were filled with sadness, with inscrutable knowledge.

Trenton said, "I suppose you're one of Drayatha's spies. Well, you can go to her, tell her the prints are ready."

The man in the black cowl never glanced aside. He said, "I have not much time. Time! What a fragile thing it is, really. Strong, ponderous—and fragile. It is always here, yet when you seek to keep it back from passing—already it is gone. But of that, enough."

"Who are you?" asked Trenton wonderingly.

"A dead man. Aie, yes. Dead for thousands of years. And yet—not dead. Alive in this little segment of space-time. Again, enough!"

"I have come from my deathbed to speak with you, man of a different age! You must stop Drayatha! At once, do you understand? If she keeps on her mad, headlong course, like a maddened steer plunging into a throng—she will destroy the world, all the universes! Time! It's strong, I tell you. It's a flow energy that is kept within rigid bounds by magnetic forces, much as a wire chains electricity."

"Go on," said Trenton hoarsely.

"She has tapped that energy-flow from the Altar...not realizing that as she drains away Time, she is altering the magnetic balances that keep it in check!"

Trenton laughed harshly. "Suppose I agree with you, old one? I'm a prisoner here—or didn't you know? What do you suggest I do?"

"Only one thing, Trenton. *Destroy the Altar!*"

The brown eyes in the shadow of the red hair widened suddenly. Trenton read alarm in them. And then—

The man faded into mist. Quivered slightly, and—

Was gone!

A BEAM of intolerable heat darted by Trenton's shoulder, stung him, whirled him frantically aside as he dove to escape its blast. The sizzling beam of power ate up the spot where the red-haired man had stood; ate it up and found—nothing.

From the floor, Trenton stared at Drayatha. Her right hand was clenched around a beam-gun. Her breasts rose and fell angrily. In the whiteness of her cheeks, Trenton read—fear.

"Who was that? Trenton, tell me! That man with the red hair! Was it—but no! In the name of all the sanities, it couldn't have been! Not—he! Trenton, who was he?"

"The little man that wasn't there," grinned Trenton, getting to his feet.

Drayatha was across the room in a long, feral stride. Her right hand came flashing up, stung hard and tingling against his cheek. Automatically, Trenton drew back. A Fleet captain was trained in gentlemanly ways. A Fleet captain did not strike back at a woman who slapped him....

But he had been caught off-guard. This time the stinging slap released the other that was inside Trenton: the come-day-go-day, God-made-Sunday sell-sword that they had made out of him in the psychiatric wards back in the Interrogation Building, ages ago... Inside him he could feel it building up, sweeping forward, cyclonic, brushing aside the fragile barriers that held it out, that kept it in check...

He snarled in his throat as his left hand moved up and sideways. He struck Drayatha's wrist with the edge of his hand, hard. She cried out. Her fingers released the beam-gun. It arched through the air.

Trenton was after it like a Procyonic Tigrat. He caught it inches from the floor, whirled and blasted a sheet of flame in front of the red-haired Draytha.

"Don't move," he told her coldly. "If you want to go on living, don't move!"

She was a statue, standing there, arms by her side. Only her green eyes were alive and filled with throbbing triumph.

He came back toward her, insulting in the arrogance of his catlike stride. He towered over her, smiling wryly. He put out a hand and closed it on her jaw. Holding her like that he bent his head and kissed her hard. When he drew back, she clung to him.

"Trenton, you've come back! I knew you would! Now, you and I... together we could..."

He shoved her away, laughed at the raw anger in her face. He said, "The man in the black cowl asked me to destroy the Altar."

"Trenton—you wouldn't!"

He said, "I don't know. One time I think that's the most important thing there is, to smash the Altar and you with it. At another time, when somebody else is inside me, riding my body and brain—the way I am now—I think I'd like nothing better than to go with you into space, to find worlds and conquer them! To drag the loot of unguessable centuries to Min-dir City and pile it high. To walk ankle-deep in diamonds and *whorl*-stones. To hunt the woman of Time, find the loveliest ones of all and—take them!"

Drayatha lifted her arms, toyed with the piles of rich red hair that crowned her shapely head. With slumbrous green eyes she mocked him. She whispered, "I am not jealous, Trenton. You can have other women for your playthings—as long as you are mine!"

TRENTON WENT and kicked the divan aside with a foot to reveal the blueprints piled beneath it. Drayatha watched him.

"Your blueprints," he told her. "I bought my freedom with them. Or did I?"

She studied him. "I was going to kill you, Trenton. That is truth. Now—I don't know. If you were as you are now, always! By Yoll! What a man you are—like this!"

She reached out, ran teasing fingertips across his mouth. She whispered, "Why aren't you *this* you all the time, Trenton? What softens you?"

Trenton laughed harshly; thought of golden Kiryla, and scowled. Could it be her goodness that called to the

real Trenton, that penetrated under the hard, sneering shell of the man he was now? Had she something in her psyche that brought out the otherness in him?

Drayatha brooded at him. She slid her white palms up his chest, touched his neck, his cheeks. Pressed to him, she whispered, "Tell me, Trenton! You know. I can read the answer in your eyes! Is it—Kiryla?"

Her laughter was soft, provocative. "That's it, isn't it? She draws the hardness out of you, as I put it in. With me you are all the conquerors of all Time. You are Alexander and Napoleon of Earth, Bral Kan of Procyon, Gartillin Vo of Deneb. You are! I feel it, inside the big chest of you. I like this side of you, Trenton. I hate the milksop that *she* makes of you!"

Her red mouth burned on his until he responded to her lure. His arms tightened, crushed her full, supple body against his. Breathless, she fought clear of him; laughed, "Don't kill me...stop! Tonight...Trenton, tonight!"

He thought of her perfumed cushions and released her, grinning. She hummed a song, luring him with green eyes and rounded body. She twisted aside as he reached for her. Sank against him suddenly, breathing, "One thing, promise me. Only one thing—and I take you as my lord!"

"You white witch! What do you want?"

"I want death, Kiryla's death! Say that she must die, Trenton. Say it!"

"NO!"

The word burst from him explosively. He brooded into the promising green eyes. He growled, "No man wars against a woman."

"This isn't war. It's politics!"

"Not death, no...not that!"

Drayatha clapped her hands. "The Altar! We will give her back to Time, Trenton. She will not die... perhaps she will live forever."

Trenton drew away from her. His heart hammered inside his chest. That was the answer! That was the way to rid this self of the golden girl who prevented his taking this

redhead for his own, who barred the path to other worlds, who held him back by a tenuous grip from looting planets and universes!

"Yes," he said slowly. "That might be the way. Time's flow will not hurt her. She and I were there once before. It will carry her along...not hurting her..."

"Carry her, Trenton, out of our lives! And now, come kiss me! Kiss me hard, hard, hard..."

CHAPTER V

IT WAS A good throne, this gigantic ebony seat encrusted with gold snakes. Trenton slapped his palm on the broad arm and laughed. His laughter rang loud in the room, rang over the white head of Mani, over the bowed, golden-tressed head of Kiryla of the Llinana-kir.

Against the walls the black-garbed Time Troopers stood, their dark uniforms lashed with golden snake designs. They were *his* troops now! And those drapes that had hung in a sunken palace on Tanit were *his*, and the massy vases like the ceramics of the ancient Thsang-kong, the captured swords chain-hung on the wall, the floor beneath and the groined roof far above him—*his*!

Trenton stared at Kiryla, felt the softness stirring inside him. He sighed. *Condemn to the time flow this girl who loves you? Be wise, Trenton! Drayatha is using you...*

A cool white hand touched his wrist, sent a tingle through him. And recaptured that other self that was a hunter of loot and women! Trenton looked again at Kiryla and laughed.

Drayatha whispered, "Condemn them. Mani and Kiryla!"

Trenton stood. He looked down at the girl, and the man. He said slowly, "Out of the gentleness of our hearts, your ruler and mistress spare you death. Instead, we give you immortality. You will be put into the time flow above the Altar."

Mani said in his deep voice, "Trenton! Listen to me. Trenton, I have spoken with—"

A trooper brought the hilt of his sword against the old man's mouth,

smashing skin and teeth. The trooper picked him up and hit him again. Then another trooper came up and dragged Mani out of the chamber.

"Kiryla..." Trenton whispered.

She did not raise her head. She turned on bare feet and padded out behind the unconscious form of Mani. Trenton watched her go, his heart slamming under his ribs.

Drayatha slid a cool hand over his shoulder. She said, "We must follow them, lover. We too, go to the Altar. Come!"

A white *jelafaf* and a black sidled restlessly under the restraining hands of a big trooper. Trenton swung up into the ornate saddle of the black. The trooper saluted, turned aside to his own mount. Drayatha reined her white saddler close to him.

"Go first, my lord. This is now—your city!"

Trenton felt the terrible pulse of pride beat up in him. His nostrils quivered. His head lifted. Far ahead Mani and Kiryla were being led to the Altar. And once they were gone forever—his real life would begin, beside the red-headed witch who stared at him with provocative green eyes!

They pounded through the wide avenues of the town. Sparks rang from the hooves. Thigh by calf with Drayatha, Trenton rode the streets of his city, knowing the power that was his, the loot that would be his, the exciting woman beside him who would share every universe in space-time with him. He thought of the perfumed cushions and her white body and—last night.

Once, as Trenton reined his *jelafaf* round a corner, he saw a man in a dark cowl staring at him with brown eyes. The man stared, and there was wordless appeal in those dark brown eyes, and fright etched in the planes of his thin face. Appeal—against what? Fright—of what? Dimly in that other-self of him, Trenton knew the answer. The man had told him...something...before Drayatha slapped him. Something of danger. Danger, not just to a person or a thing, but something frightful that affected every living

and non-living thing in all the universes. Destruction? Something about Time? If Time lost enough of its energy, the delicate balances would—

Trenton reined in, turned his stallion's head aside.

Drayatha cried, "Trenton! The Altar. They are waiting, Trenton!" And her white hand was a flame on his arm and the lure of her voice sent ripples of delight down his spine.

He kicked his heels into the animals ribs, and went on.

TRENTON remembered the Altar as long and low and flat, its faery traceries in stone friezes paneling its borders. Now it was dwarfed by giant stone ziggurats at each of its four corners; ziggurats solid with men and beam-gun emplacements. Atop each tier of steps was a twisty-barreled thing glittering in sunlight, aimed at the blue sky. Trenton knew it for a time-weapon, without thinking.

The doors of the Altar were open and the tiny forms of Mani and Kiryla went pacing into the black maw beyond them, dragging silver chains.

Trenton swung from the saddle; found Drayatha already standing, her green eyes alive and flaring with triumph. Her long fingernails dug into the naked flesh of his forearm. She quivered with excitement, with fulfillment. She breathed, "Soon, Trenton. Soon you will be all mine. No longer milksop, made of water. But steel—unbreakable! A man a woman can worship!"

Trenton grinned, strode past her toward the Altar. His blood was pounding. The hunter and the looter in him flamed high, like red tongues licking up the remnants of a paper meal. The Earth-part of him was receding fast, fading and dying under those scarlet fires.

His snake-embroidered cloak swung from his shoulders. His beam-gun holster slapped on his thigh. His boots made soft splat-splats on the hard tiles of the Altar-steps.

Drayatha was at his elbow, following; her perfume fragrant. They lumbered in her shadow, brow black as moon's space-side. The doors swung shut behind them.

Inside the Altar was a low, roomy chamber that was bare of everything but the blazing, incandescent cube that hung a foot above the oval hollow in the center of the room. It was glass and yet not glass, tangible visibility and supernal brilliance, yet intangible nothingness that might have been pure energy. It gave off streamers of white luminescence, streamers that blinded.

Drayatha told him, "It is Time, Trenton. Time harnessed into space! Held there by magnetic flows! It broadcasts energy, throws it off as a spacevox radio sending set hurls high frequencies. Our weapons and motors are geared to its pulse. It gives us all our strength. Your strength, Trenton. Look on it. That too is—yours!"

His!

The looter in him laughed in wild delight. The greatest thing in all the universe, his to share with this red witch at his side! To Time with those who opposed him. To Time with them! Let them be swept along the flow as he had been. Let them—

His face shone with the pride in him. He moved forward, where Mani and Kiryla were chained.

And stopped!

The door was opening again. A single figure stood there for a moment, advanced step by step into the room. His sandaled feet ran hollowly. Trenton saw his brown eyes blazing, saw the thin white cheeks.

Drayatha screamed, as the brown eyes regarded her.

Mani was sobbing, "You have come! Come as you promised! I have waited patiently...thought you had forgotten!"

"I did not forget. Alone, I could do nothing. I have not the strength to undo this work. I am dying... where I came from, I am already dead! I must use stronger bodies to undo my work...a body like Trenton's!"

Drayatha put out a hand, caught at Trenton's shoulder. Her fingers

locked in the stuff of his cloak. She whimpered, "Kill him, Trenton. Kill him!"

His hand fell to his beam-gun, drew it slowly from the ornate holster.

The man said, "Kiryla! Help me. You and Drayatha are the keys to this man's psyche. You are catalysts, *human catalysts*! He veers like a leaf between your two poles. Good and—evil!

"Kiryla!"

IT WAS A cry of despair that welled up from the man's throat as the beam-gun steadied on him. It had in its keening wail all the hopes of a tortured heart. It touched the golden girl's heartstrings, made them vibrate. She lifted her head, looked at Trenton.

"No!"

Just a whisper that faded into the air. But it held his finger. Drayatha shook him, "Kill him! Kill! Kill! He would prevent your taking all this as yours, Trenton. He would keep me from you. Trenton!"

His fingers tightened on the trigger again. But now Kiryla was moving forward, her chains making a clanking sound on the hard floor. She came in front of Trenton, locked her blue eyes with his even as her fingers locked his fingers.

Drayatha whirled. "Theg—kill him. You kill him, Theg!"

The bearded giant gave a roar, sprang forward, huge hands spread. And Kiryla touched Trenton's forehead and eyes with her cool white fingers and her voice was liquid honey as she breathed, "Save him, Trenton. Do not let Theg kill him."

Trenton sprang. He met the giant in midair with a titantic thud. Then they were rolling, twisting, turning on the floor. Fists hammered and battered. A knee drove into a rib, splintered it. A nose mashed on a blackbearded face, to run red blood across lips and chin.

The pain of his broken rib was agony, but Trenton broke free and clubbed his fists into the face of the giant. His knuckles came away with blood on them. Theg slammed him with an elbow, knocking him offstride; was leaping, kicking at his groin with lashing foot.

Trenton twisted, went down. His hand shot out, closed on Theg's throat. The giant doubled up, tore loose. He rolled over, came up with beam-gun. He was triggering it as Trenton dove under the greenish blast, grappling for the gun-hand.

Kiryla was screaming. Mani gave a cry of despair. And rising loud and vibrant in the locked chamber of the Time Altar, Drayatha's triumphant laughter!

"No need to fight, Trenton. Theg! No need to fight. Your task is done!"

But they did not hear him. The blood lust was on them. Sobbing, panting, cursing, Theg sought to free the arm that Trenton was turning, turning slowly and inexorably, back in on Theg.

The arm gave with a snap.

And with a convulsive move, Theg's finger touched the trigger, depressed it. A beam of greenish power slammed out of the beam-gun, hit Theg in face and chest and throat; ate up flesh and bone and sinew.

Headless, the blood-spurting trunk of the once-bearded giant toppled forward. Trenton, choking, fell aside, stood on wide-parted feet, driving breath into his lungs with dry sobs.

Mani and Kiryla knelt by the man with the brown eyes. Trenton saw his arm and shoulder were gone. He remembered that wild blast he himself and swung under; remembered Kiryla screaming and Drayatha laughing.

Mani was saying, "We will destroy the Altar. Kiryla will control Trenton. Rest easy...go back...go back..."

The man on the floor was fading, shimmering there as if composed of dust motes in a sunbeam...and was gone.

Kiryla threw back her mane of yellow hair, looked up at Trenton.

"Who was he?" Trenton asked hoarsely.

Mani said, "You did not know? That was Nannar-kir! Aie, the man who built the Altar! He built it, but he wanted it destroyed! For after it was built and sealed, he chanced by accident in his last days to find that

one of his equations was wrong. That if Time were used too long as a power source, those delicate balances between time and space and the magnetic flows would be destroyed. And once they were gone, all matter would go with them in a final holocaust!

"He came to destroy the Altar. Came—and found his strength not enough! Remember, he was dying! He was weakened with old age and sickness. He tried, and failed. He had to find someone to do his task. He chose—you, Trenton. You were neither Min-dir nor Llinana-kir. You had no prejudices, no hate of one and love for the other. You were the alien element that would have no objection to smashing the Altar."

TRENTON DREW air into his lungs. Strength was creeping back into his muscles, into his big frame.

Mani went on, "He came to me, enlisted my aid. I learned from him that you were on the other side of the Blotch. I sent Kiryla for you. I wanted you to stay with us until the Altar opened. Then you could have entered, have done what was needed...and all danger to your world and ours would be gone forever!"

Trenton licked his lips. Destroy the Altar? That godlike thing with which he could rule the universes? Unite Earth and Min-dir in the greatest empire Time had ever seen? He said hoarsely, "I can't do it!"

Drayatha laughed softly. She stood before the brilliance of the glowing white flame. It outlined the beauty of her body, threw a white aura around the crimson hair that framed her red-lipped face.

Mani rose wearily to his feet. He looked at Drayatha, and his voice grew cold and hard. "You! If it had not been for you, Trenton would have destroyed the Altar long ago. If it were not for that red lure of your witch-beauty, there would be peace on our planet."

The old man moved forward, slowly. Drayatha lifted a hand. She held Trenton's discarded beam-gun. "Another foot and you die, old one."

Mani stopped. He went on dis-

passionately, "If you die, Kiryla and Trenton will rule this world together. They will destroy the Altar, remove all danger to his world and ours. He will be locked here, unable to return to his own Earth, but he will have Kiryla..."

Mani leaped.

He drew on all the strength in his ancient body, made himself a human catapult to cross that ten feet of space. Drayatha's beam-gun was spitting green fire, but he was slamming into her, toppling her backwards even as he died.

Trenton shouted, leaped forward, staggered. The pain on his snapped ribs shot scalpels of agony through him.

He would not have been in time.

For one long moment, Drayatha and what was left of Mani poised motionless there, on the crest of that blinding brilliance. Streamers of white energy flared up around her, caressing, stroking, laving her in their radiance. Her hair sparkled redly. Her body arched, arms lifted to Trenton. Her green eyes were wide, calling, luring, summoning...

And then—

There was only the timeless white brilliance, suspended in mid-air.

Drayatha was gone. Mani was gone.

Kiryla lifted the beam-gun from Theg's dead hand. She walked toward the Altar, lifted the gun. She depressed the trigger.

Green fire met white, locked with it, licking, probing. The white fire grew verdant, and the green flared white. They formed a single high tongue of iridescence...and winked out.

The room was dark. Trenton heard the beam-gun clatter to the floor, heard Kiryla walk toward him. She touched his hand with hers, led him with her toward the doors.

Sunlight blinded them for an instant. Kiryla threw back her yellow mane, stared up at him with probing blue eyes. She whispered, "You loved her, Trenton?"

"No...yes! I—I don't know. One part of me did, the part they made

(Please turn to Page 100)

MARVEL PICKS THE BEST IN BOOK REVIEWS - 4 NEW SF NOVELS



This, the first offering in the Doubleday Science Fiction line, is what the publishers privately refer to as "a bridge novel". By this they mean an unusual adventure book designed to lead the lay reader across the *fey gap* to the sci-fi-fictionist's worlds of wonder. For this purpose they cautiously venture only 10 years into the future, into a familiarly tense world of Iron Curtain. With curt irony the world learns from Palomar that it would be ridiculous to lose its atomic temper at this point, as a rogue planet has wandered into our solar system and it's curtains for *all* Earth in a matter of 24 months.

by Max Ehrlich
Doubleday
N. Y.

It is interesting to observe that this When Worlds Collide formula, clichéd as it has become to the aficionado, apparently has caught fire with the man in the street, for *THE BIG EYE* has become a book club selection is being contemplated for radio broadcast, and the latest news on it is that it will be filmed!

So, tho it has nothing new for the s-f sophisticate, its recommendation to a friend would be a good investment toward the publication of further stf by Doubleday.

..... —Weaver Wright



In Winter '49 A. E. "Slan" Vogt, Everett "Checklist" Bleiler, Lewis "Pseudonyms" Padgett, Sam "Historian" Moskowitz and myself, a fan,—5 pollees out of 12—picked *THE WORLD BELOW* as one of the 17 Basic Books of Science Fiction in the Arkham Symposium.

It earned 4th place, I, personally, after reading science fiction since 1926 and having collected around 3000 books and magazines on the subject, unhesitatingly class *THE WORLD BELOW* as my No. 1 all-time favorite.

It is good to have *THE WORLD BELOW* back in print again after 20 years as a collector's item, but it is regrettable that Shasta has not accorded this masterpiece the format deserved by the classic. The ends of commercialism have been served by an announcement dominating the jacket—*This is a Novel of Science-Fiction*—and while this is a significant commentary on the current pulling power of the expression *science fiction* itself, one feels that for \$3.50 one should be entitled to a new printing (the book is lithographed) with a full color—even wraparound—jacket and a generous helping of top-notch interior illustrations. The lack of mood-matching artwork is tragic.

However, there can be no quarreling with the quality of Mr. Wright's chef-d'oeuvre. His time-tour-de-force transports the reader to the enthralling alien world of half a million years hence, where we are treated to an atmosphere of enigma, wonder, awe, terror and tenderness the like of which, to my mind, has never been equalled in this branch of literature. Poised, plausible, poignant and picturesque,

this supreme achievement in fantastic adventure abounds in that-variants. In **THE WORLD BELOW** Fowler Wright combined the advanced imagination of Olaf Stapledon with the psychological brilliance of Robert Heinlein.

As the book concludes, there is the possibility that the protagonist may return to the future, to the weird wonder world of the Amphibian and the Dwellers, the Frog-Mouths and Bat-Wings, the Opal Way and Invisible Bridge, the engrossing debates on the qualities of justice and mercy, morality and criminality. It all depends on his wife, Clara. Clara, you have kept us waiting 2 decades for a sequel: *For heaven's sake, Clara—!*

.....—Forrest J. Ackerman



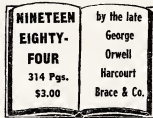
If Weinbaum were alive, I think he would give Heinlein an "Oscar" for the creation of Willis. Willis is a Martian brainball who sees all, hears all, and tells all—upon proper provocation. Then again, sometimes this animated wire-recorder in animal form gets wound up and spills more beans than he's s'posed to. Willis is awfully loyal but not overly bright.

Willis is the pet—companion is a more apt term—of a young boy on Mars, Jim Marlowe. Jim, with his friend Frank, live in South Colony. During the book the boys—sometimes helped and

sometimes hindered by the indigent beachball-with-brains—uncover a plot to prevent migration to North Colony. There is a lot of trouble before the scoundrels are scotched.

This book is definitely recommended to every science fiction enthusiast. If the plot does not sound like any great shakes, don't worry about it: it's the "touches" that make it terrific. Heinlein makes a hell of an interesting, unhackneyed planet out of Mars, with Martians that are literally out of that world. **RED PLANET** gets my green light: go buy it!

..... Weaver Wright



I would rather put a bullet thru my brain than live in Orwell's world of 35 years hence.

So, I imagine, would most every reader of **MARVEL SCIENCE STORIES**. That should insure around 100,000 sales for "1984"—followed by 100,000 suicides if convinced that Orwell has shown the evil shape of things to come. This is a shape more horrifying than anything out of Poe or Machen—or Hitler, to alternate from the fictionally frightening to the revoltingly real.

"1984", for those who value integrity, personality, identity, freedom, will prove an upsetting

emotional experience. This is the book you've heard about; you should read it. It speaks for itself; it shouts for itself, it shrieks.

If (Sanity save the day!) the 1984 of Orwell should materialize, and you have not eliminated yourself before it's too late, you will probably fit into the Outer Party, and find yourself living in a glass house. You will have *no* privacy—ever. Awake, your face will be tele-scrutinized by the Thought Police for even a suggestion of doubt of the propaganda put out by the Party; asleep, even your dreams (if not your wife or children) may betray you. Your sex-life will be stifled, your hate-life stimulated, war will be unending, you will believe that **WAR IS PEACE, FREEDOM IS SLAVERY, IGNORANCE IS STRENGTH**. Semantics will be scrambled into a null-Korzybskian insanity called *doublethink*, and in the end you will believe that black is white, day is night, two and two make three, five, or even four. You will not simply say these things with your tongue and deny them with your mind: you will *believe* them.

You will believe anything after a visit to Room IOI. Paradoxically, I cannot tell you what is in Room IOI, and yet you—and perhaps you alone—know. And you would do anything on earth to avoid enduring the horror there. Room IOI is the ultimate refinement in the Ministry of Love, where anyone (outside of the animalistic proles) who thinks unorthodoxy (just *thinks*, mind you, not necessarily acts) is taken to be tortured. Every day some acquaintance or associate of yours is being turned into gas and dispersed into the stratosphere, whereafter it is denied he or she ever existed.

Every evidence of the individual's existence is erased. Every photograph, every letter, every possession—every memory in others' minds. The name of one who is vaporized is never spoken again, never thought again; history holds no record that he or she ever was born. Many people are busily employed altering the records of the past at all times to conform with later developments. For instance, you may secretly think that you remember aeroplanes from your childhood, but there is not a scrap of evidence left in the world to disprove that the Party did not invent them so long ago—in fact, the history books say so.

The ramifications of this monstrous misshaping of mankind's mentality are too enormous to dissect in detail in a limited space. And this is not a book that should be summarily synopsized. The full 314 pages want to be read thoughtfully for the cumulative crescendo. I have not encountered a book in over two decades of science fiction reading that has chained humanity behind such a diabolical extrapol-eight-ball. Atomic bombs, bacteriological warfare, hideous mutations and the like seem somehow endurable beside the assault on human dignity that hollows men out and fills them up in such an inescapable, mind-retching manner as Orwell pictures.

This is a multibicarbonate book. Ground glass would be softer in your intestines, and you'd better get a good grip on your sanity before starting it. "1984" is no bed time story, it is a warning in scientific form of a very bad time indeed if perverted technologists achieve the ultimate in power and control.

—Forrest J. Ackerman

(Note: "1984" has been dramatized on the radio by NBC, with a commentary by James Hilton, author of "Lost Horizon". Word now comes that, like John Taine's "Green Fire", it will be produced as a play; and Mr. Ackerman states, "I have every confidence that the film industry will not overlook this powerful book in its search for screen-worthy science fiction, and it will—properly treated—make one of the most dynamic motion pictures ever produced.")

TEMPTRESS OF THE TIME FLOW by Gardner F. Fox

(Continued from Page 97)

in the psychiatric chambers. The other part...the way I am now..."

"Yes, Trenton?"

"Kiryla...there is no one but you. You know that."

She flung white arms about his neck. Her lips were smooth and sweet, cool and comforting. She hid her face against his chest, whispered, "We will make a new world, here. You and I... Do you mind never going back to Earth?"

"No, of course not. I am happy with you. We'll work together unite Min-dir and Llinana-Kir into a great empire."

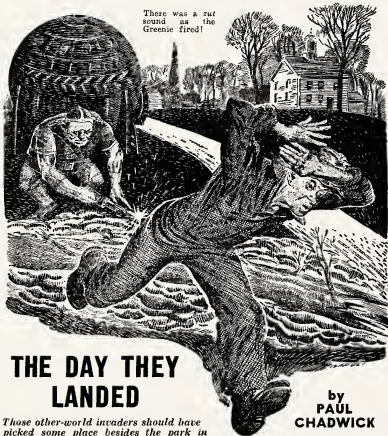
Faintly and from far away, so

deep inside him that he thought it must be his own thought, a voice called. *Aies, Trenton! Her lips are cool but mine are hot. She will comfort, but I will provoke! Find me, Trenton. Come looking for me in the time flow. You can do it. In the model of the Altar...back in Min-dir City, in the Temple! I will be waiting. Somewhere in space, somewhere in time...for you, Trenton!*

He shook himself, took Kiryla's hand and went down the steps, toward the palace. He needed Kiryla to forget the other side of him. She could make him forget—if she were strong enough.

But—was she?

There was a zat
sound as the
Greenie fired!



THE DAY THEY LANDED

by
**PAUL
CHADWICK**

Those other-world invaders should have picked some place besides the park in Eastboro to land their Flying Perisphere Thirty-seven R. Because the Selectmen of Eastboro would never stand for that kind of funny business.....

THE FIRST car went by Sam Holt's backwoods filling station at three o'clock. Sam figured the time afterwards because he had just pulled up the sleeve of his coveralls to see when the heck Ed Dennis was coming to spell him. Ed was supposed to have been there at two.

Sam was down in the grease pit giving his own jalopy a going over

because business was slack and because there wasn't anything much else to do. When he stuck his long, horsey face out to look for his socket wrench, he saw the car go by.

It was speeding like one of those crazy whippet dogs over at the Eastboro track. A big, dirt-colored sedan, its tires made a whimpering sound as it whizzed along doing at least seventy, barely holding the road.

Sam saw the set face of the driver. Back of him was a bunch of old ladies hanging onto each other and trying to keep their hats from falling over their eyes.

"Whoa!" yelled Sam. But the car was already out of sight, churning on towards Higginsville.

"Must be a fire some place," Sam decided.

He felt sure of it a minute later when three more cars came whooshing up the road. They were all going in the same direction and all were crowding the speed limit.

Sam climbed out of the pit, went down in front of the gas pumps and watched as they passed.

One driver made a queer face at him through a side window. The folks in all three cars looked scared about something.

Scratching his left ear wonderingly, Sam stared down the highway at the rear ends of the speeding autos. They didn't tell him a thing, but he had a queasy feeling in his stomach. Looking the other way, he started whistling through his teeth.

Another bunch of cars was already in sight, lurching and crowding, trying to pass each other. Sam gaped as they sped by with motors roaring, horns screeching and tires whining.

The queasy feeling in his stomach got worse. Walking back to the station, he went inside and pulled the phone off the hook. He tried to reach his friend, Bill Tweeks, in Eastboro, but there wasn't even a line hum. Muttering, he went over to his little plastic radio that never failed him, switched it on and listened. That was dead, too.

Sam said, "Gol dang it!" and spat.

He slouched down to the road again, planted himself in the middle of it, feet wide apart, and waited. When the next car showed up he began flapping his arms and cap.

It was coming fast like the others. The driver started hooting for Sam to get out of the way, but Sam wouldn't. The driver lost his nerve at the very last second and

screached to a stop with his bumper against Sam's knee.

"Don't like to pester you," Sam said apologetically, "but what's the ruckus about?"

The driver, a paunchy well-dressed man of fifty, a salesman Sam guessed, stared at him with a doughy face.

"Where've you been, son? Don't you know they've landed?"

He jerked a thumb back toward Eastboro. Then, before Sam could ask him another question, he stepped on the gas and sped off.

SAM WAS excited now, though his lean Yankee face didn't show it. It showed no more emotion than his grandfather's face had that day at Gettysburg; no more either than his Great-great-great-Uncle Asa's had when the Redcoats swarmed up Breed's Hill.

Sam got his car off the grease pit track, backed around and turned into the highway. He headed straight for Eastboro.

Other folks might be going south, but Sam Holt was going north. If something or somebody had landed in Eastboro he wanted to know about it. His kinsmen had always been a curious sort, liking to keep sharp tabs on things.

A lot more cars came whizzing along the road ahead of him and Sam had to jounce down into the ditch a couple of times to keep from being hit.

"I'll tell the constable about it," he thought. "He'll make it hot fer these fellers."

One car finally stopped ahead of him and a man thrust a perspiring face through the window.

"Turn around, young feller. You're going the wrong way."

"Why?" demanded Sam.

"'Cause they've landed. That's why. You don't want to be jailed or shot dead, do you?"

"Who's landed?" asked Sam.

"The Greenies. They came right down in Eastboro like they said they would. They're roundin' up folks right now."

"Who in heck's the Greenies?" Sam wanted to know.

"Don't you listen to the radio, young feller? That broadcast wasn't no soap opera like people thought. The Greenies are smack dab in East-boro right this minute."

"I was down in the grease pit," explained Sam. "Been there two hours. I didn't hear nothin'. Who's these Greenies?"

The driver of the other car muttered something profane, shook his head reproachfully and threw in the clutch.

Sam drove on, too. He had a hard time getting into Eastboro, hard, that is, till he had crossed the bridge over Catfish Creek and was close to the head of Main Street. Then all traffic thinned out. There was nobody in sight anywhere. It was just like being in town Sunday afternoon when there was a big church picnic in Gellert's woods. Sam rattled on till he came to the park.

He slammed on the brakes and gawped when he saw the big, funny looking machine that rested on the grass. It must be a flying machine, he guessed, for it didn't have any wheels and he didn't see how else it could have got there except by flying. It was just a big, smooth globe of shiny metal with short fins sticking out. There was a round door close to the ground on the side, sort of like the ash clean-out in a furnace.

Sam's gawping was interrupted by the arrival of two short, squat men in queer green uniforms. They came right up to his jalopy and stuck their heads through the open side windows. Their faces had a greenish cast, too. They had round features like soft biscuit dough with little black raisins for eyes.

"Halt!" said one of them. He had a silver tube in his hand no bigger than a lead pencil and he pointed this at Sam's head.

"Am halted," said Sam. "You fellers from a circus?"

They looked straight at him blankly, their little raisin eyes expressionless.

"What's circus?" asked one in an odd kind of English that Sam had never heard before. The accent

wasn't Polish or Finnish, German, Russian or Italian. The chap didn't look like a Swede either and he wasn't any Jap. He didn't look like much of anything that Sam had ever seen.

"I thought everybody knew what a circus was," Sam said. "Thought all kids went to 'em."

"We do not have it," said the man on the right. He jabbed the silver tube closer to Sam. "You will come see the leader."

"Sure," said Sam. "Mighty glad to talk to him."

He unwound his long legs, climbed down out of his jalopy and walked between the two green men toward the Eastboro postoffice.

WHEN HE got close he saw a group of subdued looking people in front of it being guarded by other green men with funny little tubes. Bert Willis, the grocer was there. So was Jim Howe, who owned the feed store, George Mills, cashier in the People's Savings Bank, and old Mrs. Cora Fink who ran the New Eureka Bakery. They seemed too scared to notice him. Sam took another long look at the big, globe-like flying machine there in the park.

"What'll they think of next!" he thought.

He was taken inside the postoffice and led back behind the racks of letter boxes. A Greenie with especially dull black eyes and some sort of fancy doodab on his uniform sat at the desk where old Hiram Crawford, the postmaster, usually sat. Hiram wasn't anywhere in sight.

The Greenie raised his round face and stared at Sam.

"Who you call you?" he said. "Where you come from? All people are supposed accounted for."

Sam shook his head.

"I heard the Greenies had landed. I just came to see what they was like."

"You did? So!" The leader lowered his small, heavy lids craftily. "You afraid of us, are not?"

"Ain't seen nothin' yet to be afraid of," said Sam.

"Oh, so? If out back of this build-

ing you care to look you will perhaps have a change of mind. People of this town they were. Some liquidation there had to be."

"You mean you've been killin' folks?" said Sam aghast.

"A few for whom quieting was essential," said the Greenie leader.

Sam lifted his grease-smeared finger and shook it fiercely under the Greenie's nose.

"We don't cotton to lawlessness in Eastboro, mister!"

"Lawlessness!" A smile played around the Greenie's puffy lips. "Lawlessness this is not, my fellow so smart. We are the law—the new law. Everyone to obey it have got."

"There ain't no new law," said Sam. "Law's same as always, unless the Selectman change it. Even then it has to go through town meetin' an' be put to a vote. Fellers have give their lives here in New England ever since the time of George Washington to see that the law's kept simple an' straight. Did you git a permit to land in the park with that contraption?"

The Greenie gave a visible start and looked at Sam fixedly.

"To liquidate you I am disconsolate to require," he said. "Necessity of new regime demand extirpation of malcontents."

"I ain't no malcontent," said Sam. "I'm satisfied with the U.S.A. and with this here town. Us Yanks don't like to pay taxes, but we do it just the same—like we obey the law even if we do grumble. It won't do no good to kill me, mister. There's a lot more fellers like me back in these woods. They won't stand fer this kind of ruckus. Neither will the Selectmen. They like it nice an' quiet 'round here."

The Greenie leader leaned forward and his odd voice sounded almost distressed.

"Earth creature please note," he said. "You do not understand. Not merely Eastboro, not just this county, state or country—the whole world, it is ours. This is the New Regime. Advance Unit Four Twenty, we are called. All habitable of the planets soon to be taken over and run by us."

"Nuts!" said Sam. "You talk big, mister, too big for your britches. Wait till the folks in Higginsville hear about this. There'll be a gang come here after you."

"That will be impossible," said the Greenie leader sharply. "Ten miles around this village there is impassable mesotronic neutralizer now created. To get through it nothing can. Military tanks, not even. High-explosive shells, no better. Atomic bombs, futile."

"Golly!" said Sam. He scratched his ear. "What in thunder did that?"

"We did it, so. Flying Perisphere Thirty-seven R. Inverse turbos steadily rotating to cut gravitational lines, create electric field and disturb mesotronic catalysis in orbit of atom. Science of Earth infantile against us. To obey us all must."

"I don't like it," said Sam. "What's more, I don't aim to stand for it."

The Greenie drew his brows together and gave a quick command to one of his men in a strange language formed by chattering monosyllables. The guard, clutching his little silver tube, pulled Sam gently by the arm.

"You will please to come with me a moment, Earth Creature."

Sam allowed himself to be drawn toward the back of the post office till he got opposite the side door where they sometimes took in the mail during the Christmas rush. There he suddenly raised his knee, hit the Greenie guard in the stomach and bolted as the man fell over.

THERE WAS a zut sound in the air beside him as he reached the door. The door frame disintegrated in a puff of vapor by his shoulder and a hole a foot round appeared. It was as neat as if Carpenter Bert Forkins had made it with his compass saw.

"Golly!" Sam muttered again as he dashed across the street.

There was another zut just then. A hickory tree fourteen inches in diameter melted in its middle and tipped over sidewise with a *swish*. It almost squashed Sam like a bug.

"Judas!" he yelled.

He ducked behind the fallen tree and ran for it then, going right by the big metal flying machine.

The loudest and final *zut* really scared him. It burned one of his trouser legs off at the cuff and cut through the marble column on which the statue of Daniel Webster stood with his hand upraised. Webster took a header into a tulip bed and stayed there with his feet sticking into the air.

Sam got out of sight behind the People's Bank Building, scooted out of town and kept running till he was exhausted.

As soon as he got his breath he was mad at himself for running, but he was even madder at the Greenies. The trousers that had been burned were a new pair of summer tweeds that he had bought at the Broadway Bargain Store in Higginsville a week before. They had set him back six dollars and ninety-eight cents.

He found a hiding spot in a clump of bayberry bushes in the hills on the west side of town and he lay there thinking. Looking over into Eastboro he could just make out the top of the Greenies' flying machine. It looked shiny and pretty with the afternoon sun gleaming on it. But the sight of it kept Sam feeling mad as all get out.

It was then that he remembered the granite quarry that had belonged to old Albert Smith and that Smith had left to his no-good son, Freem, who was too lazy to work at it. There just might be something useful in that quarry.

Sam got up and went scuffling on through the bayberry bushes and into the pines. Ten minutes' walk and he was on top of a hill, staring down into a hole in the ground where granite slabs had been taken out.

There was some greenish water in the bottom of it and a half dozen fat bullfrogs squatting around on the rocks, sunning themselves.

Mad as he was, Sam couldn't resist the temptation to shy a stone down at them. He grinned to see the way they dived under. It was just

one of his weaknesses. He'd never been able to see a fat old bullfrog sitting all comfortable-like without wanting to make him jump.

He walked down a rough road into the quarry and reached a tar-paper shack. There was a rusty padlock on it and Sam looked around for something to bust it open with. He found an old iron spike and a hunk of granite.

WHEN HE reached the door, though, he saw that someone had got there ahead of him. The padlock was split in two like a nutshell.

Sam pulled the door open, looked inside and grinned.

Eddie Whittles, the town idiot, who worked for Mrs. Fink at the bakery, pulling a little cart around, was sitting in the gloomy interior, perched on a red box, shivering. When he saw Sam he raised his arm and pointed toward Eastboro.

"Zoo-o-oo-zut!" he said.

His under lips sagged. He rolled his eyes, rested his hands against his stubbly face and rocked gently back and forth like a homesick ape.

"Don't go tippin' over that dynamite!" Sam cautioned. "Get up an' let me look at it. Maybe the mice have ate it up."

Whittles got up obediently and shambled away.

Sam paid no attention to him while he raised the lid and looked the dynamite over. There were a dozen sticks left, wrapped in stained wax paper. He found some percussion caps, too. There was an old detonator and a coil of wire over in a corner of the shack. Sam tested the detonator to make sure it still worked. Whittles watched him, rolling his head and shivering.

"Don't let 'em get you down," said Sam. "How would you like to help me, Eddie?"

"Zoo-o-oo-oot!" said Eddie.

"Sit down," said Sam. "Let's rest a while an' talk this thing over. You got your ideas an' I got mine."

He pulled Eddie Whittles down beside him on the dynamite box and they discussed the matter while the afternoon shadows lengthened. Sam

kept staring at his burned trouser leg while Eddie said:

"Zoo-oo-zut!"

By the time darkness came Sam had it all figured out. Every man, he guessed, even one who wasn't quite all there, had some particular thing he could do better than other folks. He knew what Eddie Whittles could do better than anybody in Eastboro and he thought he could work it in fine.

"We're goin' into town," Sam said. "We'll set off a few big firecrackers where they'll do the most good. Those Greenies didn't get any permit to land their machine. We can't let 'em stay there. It wouldn't be right. Selectmen wouldn't like it. When I pinch you, Eddie, you do that trick of yours like you sometimes do when you're runnin' fast with your little wagon. Understand?"

Eddie rocked his head forward and backward to show that he did. He made motions in the air and a buzzing noise with his lips.

They walked down out of the pine woods, Sam carrying the dynamite, the caps and the detonator while Eddie trailed after him with the wire and a big sack of dry pine cones that Sam had had him collect. Eddie began shivering again when they got close to the outskirts of Eastboro, but he followed Sam like a faithful shadow.

Sam slipped between the buildings, heading for the green. At the last he got down on his hands and knees and crawled between flowerbeds and bushes, right up to the big gleaming globe of metal in the center of the park. He picked the darkest side, away from the door, and he worked silently under the rounded belly of the machine while two Greenie guards on the opposite side carried on a low-voiced conversation in their strange tongue. To Sam it sounded just about the same as the language Eddie Whittles used.

ABOVE HIS head Sam could hear the steady hum of the turbos that were somehow making a defensive wall all around Eastboro

so that no help could get in.

When he got his dynamite placed where he wanted it and his caps on, he trailed the wire back across the park through the shadows and fastened the ends to his detonator that was hidden in a big juniper bush. Eddie crawled faithfully along beside him and crouched at his elbow, peering out at the town.

Only Greenies were in sight now. They were patrolling the streets with their funny little tubes in their hands. There were about a dozen of them altogether, Sam figured. Over in the post office the lights were on and he could see the head of the leader. Sam spat and wiped his mouth on his shirtsleeve. Then he nodded to himself.

"Wait here a minute, Eddie," he whispered. "When I come back an' pinch you—like this—you do your stuff."

Eddie bobbed his head again. He was smiling now, pleased that someone at last appreciated his one accomplishment.

Sam crawled back to the flying machine, struck a match and tossed it into the sack of pine cones. He scrambled back to the juniper bush as fast as he could.

By the time he got there flames were beginning to lick up out of the cones, plastering resinous smoke against the underside of the flying machine. Sam waited till they attracted the attention of the Greenie patrol over across the street. He saw the guards start for the park. Then Sam reached out and pinched Eddie Whittles in the seat of his pants.

Eddie raised his head and opened his mouth. His face took on the ecstatic look of a virtuoso about to perform and conscious that he has a sympathetic audience.

A wailing sound came from his lips, faint at first, rising by slow degrees into a shivering, ear-splitting shriek. It held the high peak of its tremolo in perfect imitation of the siren on the Eastboro Fire Department's red truck. This was the golden nugget of Eddie Whittle's particular genius. It was the trick he used to make folks jump and scamper out of his way when he was

pulling his own little cart.

Greenies came running from all over town. The patrols broke up and swarmed toward the park. The door of the post office opened, the leader thrust his head out, saw the burning cones, heard the siren and came running, too.

Sam waited till they were all close to the flying machine, in under its belly, kicking and beating the flaming cones, while others went inside through the metal door. Then he plunged down on the handle of the detonator.

There was a huge explosion out in the park; a deafening roar, a vast sheet of orange flame. It knocked both Sam and Eddie over, sending them headlong in amongst the juniper prickles and making their ears ring.

The big metal globe rose up a few feet, split apart like an over-ripe squash, then disintegrated into fly-

ing shards of metal that scattered in all directions. One of them draped itself in the branches of the fallen hickory that had nearly hit Sam.

When it was over and the flame and the noise had quieted down there wasn't a moving Greenie in sight. There was only the joyful, excited murmur of the townspeople, moving out into the street, free men and women again. It would be a mighty long time before the Greenies tried another invasion, when they never again heard from this advance unit.

Sam sat up, wiped the juniper prickles from his face and got his breath. Eddie Whittles rose mumbling at his side.

"Hated to do it," Sam muttered, looking apologetically down at the detonator that had fallen over. "But we couldn't have that kind of funny business in Eastboro, Eddie. The Selectmen wouldn't stand for it a minute."

[OVERLORD OF EARTH

by L. A. Eshbach

Continued from page 59)

double sun. According to all appearances it was a world which, except for its size, might very well support human life. If the air were fit....

Kerry shrugged. Andreu could test the air. If it were harmless and life-supporting, well and good—if not, that was all right too. He turned to the former dictator.

"Andreu, get up!"

The big man dragged himself to his feet, panting noisily, stood there swaying, his head bent far forward.

"Andreu," Kerry continued dispassionately, "I had planned to kill you, but I've changed my mind. You may live. This nameless little world is your future home. You wanted to rule a world—rule this one. It's yours—forever! Yours—alone!"

Andreu shuddered. "Alone!" he whispered. "Alone!"

With rocket pistol in one hand, Kerry held his breath, opened the door and gestured toward the outside. Like an automaton the erstwhile Overlord stumbled from the rocket ship and Kerry wrenched the door shut behind him. He sprang into the transparent nose of the plane to watch.

Panting in the thin air, the spiritless Andreu staggered across the gray-green slope to the stream, sat down. He looked around him hesitantly, his hand upon his battered face, terror dawning in his reddened eyes....

High above the little world, seated at the controls of the rocket ship, Kerry Kord adjusted the viewing plate to catch a final glimpse of a dark spot on the gray-green expanse—Andreu. He manipulated the telescopic instrument till he could see him clearly. He hadn't moved, save that the fingers of one hand were plucking idly at bruised and bleeding lips, lips that sagged vacuously....

Kerry shut off the view—and in his heart was no pity for a man who deserved no pity. Grim-faced and unrelenting he adjusted the rocket ship's controls to the position he had so carefully recorded.

Lost? He wasn't lost, as Andreu had supposed. He had but to return through the Fourth Dimension to his own time, and again the Earth would be in that particular part of space—a world now freed forever from Andreu the Overlord.

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FIRE BRAND!

PULSE-POUNDING FEATURE-
LENGTH NOVELET OF
VENGEANCE ON VENUS!

by A. BERTRAM CHANDLER

CHAPTER I

HE CAME slowly out the door of the trading post. He was mopping his brow with a large, gaudily patterned handkerchief. It was hot inside the garish,

shoddy building, in spite of all the efforts of the air conditioning plant. It was hotter outside. And the trader cursed softly, without enthusiasm, as a matter of routine. He cursed the heat, the humidity, the perspiration that dripped from the tip of his high-bridged nose, that ran in clam-

Could this then be the notorious *Firebrand*, and the thing at her slim waist the notorious, blood *Weapon*? This small, dark woman with hair cropped almost like a man's—could she have pirated the Terran spaceliner? But Fleming knew he'd have his answers perhaps sooner than he wished . . .



my rivulets down his smooth, hairless body, that saturated the loin-cloth that was his only clothing.

It was almost sunset.

The blur of light—hazy, diffuse—that was all that was ever seen of the sun from Venus, hung low above the western horizon, turning the sullen yellow of the sky to hot gold. Eastward, darkly ominous shadows were already creeping up the eternal overcast. And there was a faint flicker of lightning, a low growl of thunder, sensed rather than heard.

Inland from the post stretched the marshy plains, the lush, low jungle. Distant, more than half shrouded by mists, were the unpretentious undulations of the smooth hills. And to the north was the sea—like the sky above it, a dirty yellow. Little, tired wavelets collapsed in utter exhaustion upon the grey beach, well below the line of oozing, gelatinous scum that was high water mark. And there was a brief flurry of foam as something big and black broke surface, threshed the water with tail and fins, then vanished.

The trader stood at the root of the jetty, stared out to the northwest. Now and again he raised his hand absently, brushed away the little winged insects that hovered in a dancing cloud around his close-cropped blond head. But all his attention was given to the distant skyline. Vague it was, and misty. And nothing solid broke the indeterminate union between sea and sky. It seemed that nothing ever had broken it—that nothing ever would. But the trading post, the jetty, were evidence that ships had sailed these seas. *Had sailed...*

Already *Aphrodite*, the little freighter operated by the Venus Trading Corporation, was a week overdue. Long since, the trader would have called Port Lanning to make enquiries, but for the fact that among the cargo that *Aphrodite* should have been bringing were spares to replace certain burned out components of his radio.

He was worried. This had never happened before. *Aphrodite*, until

now, had always arrived with clockwork regularity. And the long talk, the drinking session, with her skipper had been one of the few, welcome breaks in his monotonous routine, one of the things that helped to keep him sane. And the natives were talking, he knew. He had seen them looking out to sea, had heard them muttering among themselves in their croaking, incomprehensible language. And the drums had been beating in the low hills, had been rapping their intelligence from peak to insignificant peak, from island to island.

He was a man alone—one lone alien among hostile myriads. His weapons commanded respect but he knew that, if it came to a showdown, he could not hope to stand off assault, siege, indefinitely. He allowed himself a momentary disloyalty to the Corporation, a dull resentment against their policy of economy, retrenchment, that had reduced the staffs of the trading posts from two or three to one. With two men to stand watch and watch the post would be practically impregnable. With two men to man the launch the dangers of the hazardous voyage to Port Lanning would be more than halved.

He was a man alone—and he almost felt that he was the last of his kind upon this steaming world. There were times when he would have thought so save for the fact that, once or twice in the last three days, he had heard the drumming of rockets, the distant, whistling scream of jet-propelled aircraft, above the clouds.

The sun went down, and the gold faded to yellow, to green, and the indigo shadows crept across the sky, and the lightning was dazzlingly violet, running down in rivers of vivid flame from the zenith. And where the little waves lapped listlessly at the sand was a dim, pallid fire, and where the line of scum lay along the high water mark was a brighter light, shining with the luminescence of decay, of rotteness. And in the hills and in the jungle drum answered drum, the staccato, coded

melody drowned ever and again by the crashing thunder, fading and swelling as the rising, gusty wind veered and shifted.

The first rain began to fall.

For long moments the trader stood in the downpour, grateful for the refreshing, cleansing coolness. And then his body shook with a slight chill, and he remembered that his alarms were yet to be set and tested, and that he would be a good target against the glow from the door of the post, and that his pale body would stand out against the darkness in vivid relief with each lightning flash.

Walking slowly, striving to ignore the uncomfortable feeling in his shoulder blades as he walked to the open door, turned his back to the hostile marsh and jungle, he went inside. And the door shut, and there was no longer any light save that of the lightning and the phosphorescence of the sea; and the post, shrouded in rain and darkness, its garish colours forgotten, loomed like a fort.

It was a fort.

There was a brief rattle of fire from the cupola on the roof as the trader tested his guns against the coming night.

And the drums, distant but insistent, answered.

THE TRADER pushed aside his plate, fumbled in the pouch at his belt for his cigarettes. *One more carton, he thought. I shall have to go easy...* And his mind, as he brooded over this last deprivation, was that of a filially devoted but unjustly punished child. *I have always been a loyal servant of the Corporation, he thought. The trite phrase pleased him, and he repeated it aloud. And his memory, as he smoked the rationed cigarette, ran over the countless instances in which he had proved his loyalty—petty economies, shrewd bargains, frank and unashamed swindling.*

He sighed, rose from the table. He carried the dirty plates, the debris of his meal, into the little scullery. The debris of the last meal was still

there, and that of the meal before—but until it became offensive he would take no steps to dispose of it. He returned to his living room, got out his Log and his account books. And there he sat until the scratching of his pen was drowned by the shrilling of the alarms.

His first action when he reached the cupola was to open the switch that put the guns on automatic fire. Had he not done so they would have blasted, in a very few seconds, the figure that was staggering through the rain, over the short, sodden, grass-like vegetation towards the post. The stranger, wavering like a white moth in the beam of the searchlight, was indisputably human. Here was no scaly monstrosity, no Disney frog trying to look like a man, no batrachian undecided whether to walk erect or hop.

The trader cursed. It was obvious, in spite of the teeming rain, the downpouring torrent that turned the beam of his searchlight into liquid silver, that his visitor was a woman. Again he swore—but his oaths lacked any real weight. It was a full month since his last leave in Venusburg, since his immersion in the mercenary delights, the commercialized ecstasies, of that city. And he was hungry for the sound of a female voice, the sight of a female face and figure, the feel of soft woman-flesh against his own.

But suddenly he became aware that the beating of the drums was no longer distant, was no longer confined to the distant hills. The thunder and the lightning had ceased, and there was no sound but the incessant beat of the rain—the beat of the rain and the beating of the drums. From all around it came, from the south and the east and the west. And the fringe of the jungle from which the girl had run seemed to waver, to put out pseudo-pods, to creep out over the pallid marshland.

There was a flicker of fire, then, along the jungle verge. And there were great goutts of spray tossed up at the girl's feet. And she weaved as she ran—and the trader realised that her unsteady gait was not alto-

gether the result of fatigue, that she was putting the unseen marksmen behind her off their aim.

A flick of the hand—and the searchlight was on manual control. Another deft motion—and the door of the post was opened. And then the beam swept up, and along the tide of dark, glistening bodies, showed with pitiless clarity the horde of Venusian Swamplanders, pointed them out to the questing tracer of the heavy machine gun. The attack surged forward over its own debris. And the flashes of fire along its front became more frequent, and the strange thudding made by the rifle bullets as they struck the thick, tough plasti-glass of the cupola.

But it couldn't go on for long. Savages the Venusians may have been—but they were intelligent savages. Nonhuman they were—but, like humankind, each individual placed a definite value upon his own life.

And so the tide withdrew, and the marsh was presently splotted by the great, pallid bodies of the scavenger worms that oozed up from out the sodden soil, and the song of the drums grew distant and still more distant, and drum answered drum from peak to insignificant peak, and rattling, incomprehensible messages ran all the long, straggling length of the Van Dusen Archipelago.

And the trader put his weapons, his searchlight, once again on automatic control, tested his circuits, and went down from the cupola to meet his unexpected guest.

CHAPTER II

SHE WAS SMALL, this woman and darkly brunette, her hair closely cropped, almost like a man's. And the face was neither beautiful nor even conventionally pretty, but it had a charm, a vivacity under the fatigue, that made uninteresting by comparison the simpering Venusburg beauties flaunting their half-nude charms in full color all along the walls of the trader's living room.

Her upper garment was in rags, and the smooth skin, from shoulder to waist, from thigh to broken sandals, was a network of scratches, evidence of the thorns and brambles through which she had forced her way. And the blood oozed still from the shallow wounds, spread in a wet film over the wet, smooth skin.

Above the bedraggled loincloth was a belt, and from it depended a holster, and from the holster protruded the butt of a heavy pistol. Sight of the weapon, of its grained wood grip worn smooth and polished by long handling, did much to inhibit the emotions that were stirring in the woman-starved man. And as he shifted his gaze to her cool grey eyes, his own faltering uneasily under the steadiness of her regard, she spoke.

"Thank you," she said simply.

It was gratitude—but it was gratitude such as might be displayed by royalty in the acknowledgement of some service performed by a courtier. There was some power, in her or behind her, that demanded assistance as though by divine right.

The trader's glance fell to her feet, to the pools of water that were slowly growing on the thick pile of the carpet.

"In there," he said with a gesture towards the door, "you'll find some dry clothes... And ointment for your scratches. There is some danger of infection."

"I know."

The voice, a contralto that could have been sultry, was cool, almost disinterested. The man was at a loss. This woman was altogether outside his experience. But he went to his bedroom, picked up a pile of garments almost at random, gave them to her with a hint of shyness, of apology. And he went to a cupboard, brought out his last precious bottle of whisky, set it, with two glasses, on the table. And he emptied the contents of two whole packets of cigarettes into an ornamental box that was but rarely used. And he ran his hand over his chin, and wished that he had shaved. And then he went back into his bedroom and changed his plain, none-too-

clean loincloth for one that was patterned with gay flowered designs, that to his mind had always suggested palm trees, guitars, a full tropical moon. And when the girl came out he was disappointed to see that she was still wearing her gun.

SHE HAD achieved a sarong effect with the clothes that he had given her. It suited her. All that she lacked was an hibiscus flower behind the ear. Ugly, incongruous, was the broad leather belt, the holster, the heavy pistol. And so was the case or pouch that hung on her right hip, that was bulging with what had the appearance of papers.

The trader, mute enquiry in his eyes, poured whisky into her glass. When it was almost full she signalled to him to stop. Before he could fill his own she had raised hers, had swallowed its contents with almost a single gulp.

She said: "I needed that."

"You really must have." The man was shallowly sympathetic. Then—"My name is Fleming, Peter to my friends. And this place is Howard's Landing."

"Howard's Landing? Tell me, Fleming, how can I get to Port Lanning?"

"By sea. There is a launch. But *Aphrodite* should be in at any moment now. She is a week overdue already."

"She'll never come. But how soon can we leave? It is imperative that I get to the port as soon as possible."

"Not so fast," ejaculated Fleming. There was too much secrecy—even though it was unintentional—too much high-handed demanding. "Before we go any further—who are you? What are you? What are you doing here? And—" he had just realised the calm certainty with which she had made her statement—"what do you know about *Aphrodite*?"

"Don't you know?" It was the girl's turn to be surprised.

"No. Both my transmitter and receiver burned out two days before the ship was here last. She should

have been bringing spares..."

There was a little silence, broken only by the steady drumming of the rain on roof and walls, by the distant drums calling from hill to hill, from island to island, all along the straggling length of the Van Dusen Archipelago. And there was a sound that could have been rifle fire, but it was too far away to bring any hint of immediate menace.

The girl looked at the trader, at the useless radio set along the further wall. She got to her feet, sagging a little, for she was very tired. And she went to the receiver, tinkered a while with dials and switches, satisfied herself that the apparatus was in truth inoperative. Then—

"You must have heard of me. I am Elspeth Van Dusen. And *Aphrodite* will not be coming because she has been seized by us, has been converted into a gunboat."

Fleming said, harshly: "You are talking in riddles. But I have heard of you. The Van Dusen woman. The firebrand. And there is a reward for you."

"Yes." The girl's hand fell to the polished butt of her pistol. Her face told of some mental struggle, of a decision struggling to be made, of alternatives weighed and balanced. The exact nature of the struggle the man was never to know—whether or not to hand out to him the same line of propaganda that had been handed out to the other traders, that had won most of them to the rebel cause; whether or not to count on the dangerous, two-edged weapon of her sex.

And the tension in the room was intensified as some shift of wind, some freak of conductivity, brought again the rhythmic throbbing, the coded melody, drum calling drum from peak to unpretentious peak, drum answering drum all along the straggling length of the archipelago.

PERHAPS it was the drums that decided her. It was the low throbbing, beating in time with her pulse, the rhythm of her blood, that told her that, here and now, the use of her womanly weapons would be

dangerous—to herself. And she was tired, and she doubted her ability to keep the situation under control should she allow it to develop.

"This is how things stand," she said, her voice crisp, official. "We, the colonists, have risen against the Corporation. Most of the cities are with us, the bulk of the traders. And some of the Corporation police have deserted to us, bringing their arms. We hold the Macrae Coast from Port Lanning to just south of Venusburg. There is fighting in De Kuyper's Land. There has been a naval action in the Rynin Straits, with heavy losses on both sides. And neither of us has air superiority—neither of us has any air force to boast about. Most of the rockets and jet planes were destroyed on the ground, by sabotage..."

"And Earth...?"

"Earth is neutral. Earth will intervene only if either side uses atomic weapons. The Commissioner announced that his duty was merely to protect the interests of Terran nationals. And—under corporation law—there are no Earth nationals on Venus. Only the commissioner, his staff, and the crews of the two space liners still at Port Lemaire."

"And you say that most of the traders are with you?"

The girl looked at his face; puzzled it was, incredulous, but not unintelligent. Dispassionately she analysed him. *He has a brain, she told herself with a flash of insight, but no mind...* With distaste, but almost with sympathy, she applied the rules of the science, the art, she had learned when she was a student of psychology, the skill that had been of such value to her as a propagandist. And she saw on what fertile ground the seeds of Corporation indoctrination had fallen. The Corporation was more than bread and butter—it was mother and father, it was Earth. And it was the friend of the little man who would be king, of the type not sufficiently able, or just a little too unlucky, to rise to high rank on any of the democratic worlds. That was it. Under its rule the Corporation gave

kinship. True—it was only the rule of a few square miles of swamp, of jungle, over a few hundred or a few thousand non-human savages. But it was power, the authority to be a just or an unjust judge, the sole arbiter in disputes, to kill or spare without question. For, so long as the Corporation's posts showed a profit, no questions were asked. And the traders, neither merchant nor civil servant nor bureaucrat, but a little of all three, held undisputed sway over most of the area of Venus outside the cities.

And they hated the people of the cities—the intellectuals, the masterless men. They hated them for their enmity to the Corporation. They hated them for their intention to raise the far from brainless Swamplanders to human cultural levels. For they had long been monarchs by Divine Right—and the Corporation was their god.

"Most of the traders are with us," said the girl again.

"With you?"

"Of course."

"And the others?"

"Dead."

"You filthy murderers!" shouted Fleming. He took a step towards her, hand upraised, face contorted with passion, the loose, weak mouth set in a hard line of hate. And he stopped when he realized that he was looking straight into the muzzle of the girl's pistol. She had drawn with the swiftness and smoothness of a striking snake—and he did not need to be told that she would pull the trigger should she think it expedient. He had seen weapons in women's hands before, but had sneered, had laughed, had refused to take either the weapons or their owners seriously.

But this was different.

CHAPTER III

"**W**ILL YOU sit down," said Elspeth Van Dusen. It was more of an order than a request. Her voice was emotionless. She gestured towards a chair with her gun.

Fleming sat down. He was not sorry. His knees were trembling, and he knew that the blood that had suffused his face had fled, that the shock of coming hard up against a purposiveness that would stop at nothing, must have produced a deathly pallor. And his pride was hurt and his comforting doctrine of male superiority had received a severe blow, and he needed time to at least—think of some face-saving gesture.

The woman sat opposite him, the lithe grace of all her movements struggling through the hampering garment of her weariness. And she lowered her pistol, but it and the hand that held it lay on her right knee, could move, if required, with deadly speed and accuracy.

She said: "Some of the traders have been murdered. Did you know Williamson at Taylor's Bay?"

Fleming nodded.

"He was Venus born. Yet he was loyal to the Corporation. He had his wife living at the post with him..."

...tall, golden of hair and golden of skin, Eleanora Williamson glided through Fleming's memory... There was the time that he had stopped overnight at Taylor's Bay on his way to Venusburg... And Williamson had been away, visiting the little chief of a nearby village... He'd returned early that evening, unfortunately but in the eyes of Eleanora had been the tacit understanding that some other time...

"...and she has been murdered, too. They flayed them alive, and used the skin for their drums..."

...and the memory of Eleanora was replaced by the vision of a screaming red horror...

"...and it has been the Corporation that has murdered them—and many others."

Fleming fought down his rising nausea.

He said: "The Corporation? But..."

"Yes. The Corporation. You saw the mob that was after me. Where do you suppose they got their rifles? And they have machine guns, too, and artillery—the old, worn-out

pieces that have been thrown out of the police arsenals..."

"The Corporation? Arming the natives?" This was the ultimate crime, the unforgivable sin—and yet he was not as incredulous as he should have been. His reception of the story was the crystallisation of months, of years of doubts, of disapproval of petty economies, of unnecessary harshness towards employees. He must have known for a long time that his idol had feet of clay—but he would never have admitted it. It had taken this stranger, this hated firebrand from the cities, to push the false god from its pedestal.

He said, flatly: "I don't believe it."

He almost convinced himself with the conviction in his tone.

"No?"

SHIFTING her gun to her left hand, holding it at the ready, the girl fumbled in her wallet. Papers fell out, littered the floor. At last she found that which she wanted—a score or so of sheets of various sizes, clipped together. She threw them to the trader. And she stooped to retrieve the documents, the flimsy sheets with their intricate designs, that had fallen to the floor. And Fleming saw his chance, and moved swiftly—but not swiftly enough. Again he was looking into the muzzle of the pistol. And—

"Next time I fire," said the girl. Then— "While you're here you can pick these up for me."

Fleming picked them up. There were documents of all kinds. There were banknotes of high denominations—not Corporation money but good, solid Earth currency. Elspeth Van Dusen's eyes narrowed when he handed them to her. She could have sworn that only reports and similar papers, valueless to all save those in the movement, had fallen. She had made, she knew, a bad mistake. But it was too late to rectify it.

She stuffed the papers back into the pouch. She gestured again towards Fleming's chair with her pistol. And—

"Read," she said again.

The trader read. There were copies of orders made by the Corporation, of acknowledgments made by its agents. There were the originals of both orders and acknowledgments. And there was a signed, witnessed statement made by Fergus, the skipper of *Aphrodite*, admitting the part that he had played in arming the Swamplanders. It was damning evidence, incontrovertible, telling a tale of a system in which profit took precedence over human work, wealth and happiness. The papers could have been forgeries. They could have been lies coming from the rebel propaganda machine. But Fleming could not convince himself of this. The story they told tallied too well with scores of little, hitherto unrelated facts stowed away in the odd corners of his brain, that had never, until now, been brought out into the light, had never been recognized as being the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle.

The trader read on, his brow furrowed, his whole attitude that of a man whose gods are gone, who has no gods with which to replace them. And Elspeth Van Dusen stuffed the other papers into her wallet, the banknotes, the millions of credits of Terran currency.

I was careless, she thought. I was a fool. But I am tired...

And she remembered the Spurling swooping down to the Port Lemaire landing field, the grey-uniformed figures of the Corporation police falling like ninepins before the fire from its guns. And they had boarded the Earth liner, and they had dragged Hoare out of his stateroom... It was a pity that he had been killed by the fire from his own men when they were running back to the Spurling... And there had been the Terran officers—some approving, others regarding her and her men as no better than bandits. The Captain had shouted about piracy and had threatened reprisals. The Purser had needed no urging at pistol point to make him open the safe...

And unexpected reinforcements of police had arrived, and Morrison and Blake, who had left the Spurling

against her orders, had been killed, and a withering fire had swept the landing field as they were running to the plane, and they had all been killed... Excepting herself. And she had got the Spurling up, and the police had opened fire with one of the anti-aircraft batteries. Their shooting had been wild—but they had scored what was almost a direct hit on the turret drive.

SHE HAD realised, then, that she could never hope to make Port Lanning. She had headed for the coast. So far as she knew all the remaining posts were friendly. But before she could make Howard's Landing the drive had failed altogether... She did not care to dwell upon the flight through the jungle, the throbbing, insistent drums on all sides, the nagging, panic-inducing memory of what had been done to the wife of the Taylor's Bay trader, the mutilated corpse and the flies, the fact that she and her partisans had arrived too late to save, and before the scavenger worms had done their cleansing work...

And the fingers of her left hand beat a little, soft rhythm on the arm of her chair, a staccato melody that was in time with the faint, distant throbbing, brought by some shift of wind or freak of conductivity, as drum called to drum from peak to unpretentious peak, as drum answered drum from island to island, all down along the straggling length of the archipelago. And she smiled, and her hand went down to caress the wallet at her belt, the money that was to be the price of ultimate victory. And to her the distant drums were the rattle of small arms, the thud of explosives, as Venusburg fell to the rebels and to the Corporation police under Colonel Hendaye—who could be bought...

Fleming heard the sound. He looked up. And he remembered, illogically, a girl in Venusburg. She had been, he recalled, a queer kid. She had liked poetry. It never occurred to him that, had the dice been thrown a little differently, she

herself might have been a poet. And, one night in her rooms, he had picked up a book, little, bound in limp leather. And in a spirit of derision he had started to read—and had fallen under the spell of the tinkling quatrains, the philosophy of hedonism that they expounded. How did it go?

*...Then take the Cash, and let
the Credit go—
Nor heed the Music of a Dis-
tant Drum...*

A distant drum. Arise, ye prisoners of starvation... Comes the Red Dawn... *Oh yeah?*

And he looked at the girl. He saw that she was half dreaming, that she was seeing and hearing things outside his range of vision, of comprehension. And such was the longing intensity of her thoughts that they half communicated themselves to him, carried by the quivering air. He sensed dimly who and what she was. And the half-realization brought him no closer to knowing her, no nearer to sympathy; coloured his feelings only with scorn and derision.

*Then take the Cash and let the
Credit go...*

CHAPTER IV

CREDIT... Where did it get you? The Van Dusen who had been the first on Venus had received the credit for his actions—and had died a poor and broken man. This Van Dusen who hoped to be the liberator of Venus... Perhaps the history of the future would ring with her praises—but what would her life be? Danger, the continual struggle against adversaries and, should the times become more stable, arduous, unrelenting toil until the end. The only true happiness for a woman was in the home, with children, in the service of the stronger sex. Even the Venusburg girls got more from life than she did...

And the little fool must have a cool million in good Earth credits

in her wallet. And she would take them to Rebel Headquarters, or the Central Committee, or whatever they called themselves, in Port Lanning and say: Look what a good girl am I. And they would pat her on the head and chase her out on some other scatterbrained mission...

The money belonged to the Corporation. That much was obvious; no other individual or group of individuals on Venus possessed such huge sums of ready cash. It had been stolen. But that had been the fault of other servants of the Corporation, not himself. Besides—by arming the natives the Corporation had forfeited the allegiance of every right-thinking man. And if he should rob the thief, deprive her of her spoils, he would be rendering a signal service to his employers. It would mean that arms from neutral Earth could not be purchased, that high government officials could not be bribed.

And that was the only service that the Corporation could now expect of him.

Once in Venusburg—and one of those notes would smooth his way to Home, would buy his passage to distant Earth...

The sound of the drums came louder, louder, beating in from the jungle, breaking against the thick walls of the post like the breakers of a long, heavy swell rolling in unchecked from the other side of the world, rising and falling, setting the very air a-shake so that visual images seemed to shiver as if seen over a flame.

The two in the room roused from their reveries, looked at each other with something akin to intimacy, drawn together in a strange, sexless union by the bond of common fear. And the alarm bells shrilled, and sharp, distinct, above the rhythmic throbbing came the rattle of musketry.

The trader was first to his feet. He ran out of the door, up the stairs to the cupola on the roof. And when he got there his searchlights were blazing, and the ugly snouts of his guns were swinging from side to

side in small arcs, the noses of small, bloodthirsty animals smelling out the prey. And the edge of the jungle, to the south and the east and the west, was alive with little, twinkling points of flame, with the ragged volley fire of the Swamplanders, kept under some semblance of control by the mission-educated savages who were the Corporation's officers.

"Take the eastern sector!" shouted Fleming.

The girl obeyed mutely. And her guns, and the trader's to the west, were answering fire with fire, were replying to rifle bullets with three-quarter-inch explosive tracer. To the south, where the guns were still under full automatic control, the tide of attack surged out from the jungle, across the swampland. And so far it came, and crossed the invisible line drawn and measured by the electronic fire control gear—and the southern guns added their stammering clamour to that of the manned weapons.

Fleming swung his guns around in a great arc to sweep the flank of the broken attack; on the other side of the cupola the girl did the same.

"It always works!" shouted the trader, his face aflame with the berserk joy of killing. The Van Dusen girl did not reply. Her face was serious. She killed efficiently, of necessity, and took no pleasure of it. She deplored the slaughter of those who should have been her allies, registered it in her mind as another crime for which the Corporation would have to answer.

FAR TO THE south the jungle was lit by a flash, a gout of vivid orange that flamed on the underside of the low overcast. Seconds later came a screaming roar that passed overhead, that receded rapidly, that culminated in a pillar of fire and smoke and high-flung spray in the sullen sea. The crash of the bursting shell came seconds before the thud of the gun. To the east was another flash, and to the west two more. The shells fell short and wide; the gun to the south fired again and it, too, was short.

Fleming tried elevating his own weapons, tried to attain the range of the Swamplanders' artillery, but it was useless. The girl saw this even before the first tracer were falling, all of a mile short, into the dark jungle.

She said: "It's hopeless. And it's only a matter of time before they get the range, before they blow the fort to smithereens..."

"Artillery..." muttered the trader bitterly. "They gave *them* artillery. They never gave *me* anything heavier than a machine gun..."

His voice was hurt, complaining, and it was obvious that the nature of the armament issued to the natives had utterly destroyed whatever vestiges of loyalty to the Corporation that were left in his mind. He—an Earthman—could be trusted only with relatively light automatic weapons. Those over whom he had been given dominion had been entrusted with the power of gods; the means, the ability, to strike and maim and slay over a distance measured in miles, not in yards.

"This launch of yours," the girl's voice was urgent, "where is it?"

"The boathouse by the jetty..."

He loosed off another futile burst at the distant guns, winced as a shell seemed barely to skim the cupola, as another burst hard against the southern wall of the post. He looked almost reproachfully at the weapons that had been the symbols of, the means of enforcing, his authority. He threw the switch that would put them all on full automatic control, at the command of the deadly accurate but indiscriminating brain whose sense organs rotated ceaselessly and tirelessly atop the cupola. Not looking back, not looking at the girl, he stumbled down the stairs. And as the girl followed there was a burst of fire from all guns as a fresh attack burst out from the fringe of the jungle; advanced, wavered; withered as it crossed the invisible line measured and drawn by the electronic fire control.

WHEN SHE GOT down into the post the trader was

packing a bag, throwing into it clothing, photographs, the last carton of cigarettes, the last bottle of whisky. He did not look at her, but glanced hurriedly around what had been his home, making last decisions outside the range of her knowledge, her experience, as to what was to be crammed somehow into the bag, what was to be left for the slimy fingers of the Swamplanders. He plucked a photograph of one of the Venusburg beauties from the wall, placed it, not without care, on top of his other possessions, pulled the zipper of the bag shut with a decisive gesture. And he started for the door, the bulging container bumping his legs. The girl followed.

Outside the air was hot, humid, lit by the flicker of gunfire, by the flare of close bursting shells, by reflected light from the searchlights on the cupola that were still, like the antennae of some monstrous insect, swaying and dipping, vaguely questing. And like that of swift flying insects was the passage past their heads of singing bullets as unseen marksmen on the jungle verge, handicapped by the flickering, flaring, shifting light, tried their hardest to pick them off; as Death sighed and passed them by.

They were more than half way to the boathouse when the girl ran two or three steps forward, caught up to the trader, clutched his arm.

"What?" he demanded roughly.

"The northern guns in the cupola. Are they on automatic control?"

He stopped, swayed as the raised, forward-swinging right foot was checked abruptly, was lowered gingerly to a place beside its fellow.

"I forgot..." he stammered.

"Then you'd better go back and switch off."

Fleming turned, looked at the post, black against the beams of its own searchlights, against the brief, eye-searing flare of the bursting shells. And as he watched a whole corner of the squat, square building was torn away, was dissolved in the incandescent blast of high explosive. And the next shells fell wide, proving

that the hit had been more a matter of luck than skill.

"You'll have to go," she said. And the unsteady light gleamed on the metallic object in her hand, the gun with which she was prepared to enforce her commands.

"But..."

And then the argument was settled. A shell landed fair and square on the cupola. And the searchlights went out, and the guns were dead, and there was nothing whatsoever to hinder the inevitable rush from the jungle.

And as the trader fumbled with the lock of the boathouse door the drums were beating with a note of triumph, were closing in from all sides, their staccato melody enhanced by the noise of the ragged, random volleys that, abruptly, ceased. The Swamplanders liked to take their prisoners alive if possible. And there were precious minutes wasted whilst the trader set the gyro compass of the launch to the dock heading, waited until the flywheel was revolving with sufficient speed. And more minutes were lost when the screw had to be cleared of the hastily slipped stern line; and the boathouse landward door was already going down before the battering rams when the launch surged out through the seaward entrance, trampled beneath her sharp forefoot those who had swum out and around to cut her off. And the rifles opened up again, and the bullets threw up goutts of spray, sang with a high, keen note as they struck the smooth plastic of hull and upperworks, the metal of fittings, and glanced off.

And then they were out to sea, into the darkness, under the cover of a welcome and opportune bank of mist; followed only by the menacing, yet fading, throb and rattle of the drums.

CHAPTER V

IT WAS hot in the pilot room of the launch. The windows were down, and the wind, created by the motion of the craft, swept

through, presented an unconvincing illusion of coolness. And the sun, climbing slowly towards the meridian, no more than a diffused blur behind the mists, the eternal overcast, added to the humidity with every degree of altitude gained.

Normally, this would not have worried the Venus-born Elspeth Van Dusen. This was her world, and she loved it; and to her Earth, with its clear skies, its winds, cool more often than not even in the Tropics, would have been as uninviting as is Mars to the Earth-born.

But she was tired.

With Fleming she was keeping watch and watch, but her watch below had been a matter of fitful, uneasy slumber, broken by the efforts of the trader to force the bolted door into the cabin, by the shrilling of the alarm bells when a school of the huge, Venusian flying fishes attacked, by the hectic, eventful minutes she had spent behind the launch's machine gun whilst Fleming maneuvered the little ship.

And tiring, too, was the strain of keeping a constant check upon the trader's every action, of making sure that he was keeping the launch headed Nor' West for Port Lanning and not North by West for Venusburg. When she had first come on watch she had obtained observations—a position line by magnetic dip, crossed by a line of soundings as they passed over the Clarendon Deep. As yet Fleming was playing square. Whether he would continue to do so she doubted. But she carried the means—her hand went down to holster—to enforce his unwilling loyalty to the rebel cause. And she carried in the wallet at her side that which would have seduced many a man from his allegiance even to a cause in which he most passionately believed...

THE LAUNCH slid through the toily water, the hot mists, as smoothly and easily as something in a dream. And some shift of wind, some freak of conductivity, brought quivering life to the humid air; low, on the borderline of the senses,

rhythmically monotonous, drum called to drum from peak to insignificant peak, drum answered drum from island to low island, all down along the straggling length of the archipelago. And the sound that should have been a warning of danger, that should have brought alertness, lulled; and the ticking steering repeater, the ever so slightly wavering line drawn by the course recorder on its slowly revolving drum, swam giddily before the girl's eyes as she strove desperately to keep her heavy lids from falling. She thought that it would be wise to cut out the automatic pilot, to take the wheel herself. But to raise her hand to the switch was too much effort. She started the movement—and slumped down in the chair. And she did not stir when the door of the cabin behind her opened silently and slowly, a fraction of an inch at a time. But when the soft lead piping in the trader's hands struck the back of her neck, she jerked convulsively.

He thought at first that he had killed her, but then he saw that she was breathing. She would have to die anyway, of course, some time before Venusburg. He had relinquished all thought of claiming the bounty on her dead body for, large as the reward was, it was small compared with the bills that he now pulled, with avid hands, from her wallet.

Alive, she would talk. She would remain silent, if possible, about the plans, the secrets, of the Central Committee of the revolution. But regarding his theft of what had already been stolen, she would need no urging. Dead—and they would wonder what had become of the huge sum that Hoare had been taking to Earth.

So she would have to go...

But first...

He felt the compulsion to assert his masculinity, to prove to his own satisfaction that this servant of the dialectic, of forces outside his limited comprehension, was, after all, just another woman. And so he found some strong cord in the pilothouse

locker, and he lashed her securely, then dragged her down to the cabin. He threw her on to one of the bunks, returned to the control post.

And there he busied himself briefly with chart and parallel rules and dividers, laid off the course that would bring the launch to the Venusburg approaches. The steering repeater clicked rapidly as the bows swung round to the new heading. And that was all that, to the eye, was changed. There was still the same hot mist, clinging to the oily surface of the water, blowing in stifling clouds through the open windows; the same flickers of the little red light on the alarm panel as the radar, the asdic, picked up dangers that were too far away to be an immediate menace. Fleming pondered briefly on the strangeness of Venusian evolution, on the fact that no indigenous life form possessed organs, senses, to serve in lieu of sight under such conditions as these. But the theory—of which he had briefly and disinterestedly read—of recent vulcanism did not mean anything to him. All that he felt was a dim thankfulness to something vague and far away, a gratitude for the more than even chance he had been given to bring the launch to Venusburg singlehanded.

WHEN Elspeth Van Dusen woke up the first thing she saw was Fleming. He was looking at her, his eyes hot and greedy. And tendrils of the fog had followed him down the short companionway to the cabin, were eddying around the room, were sucked up into the column of hot air that was rising above the master gyro compass.

For some reason this seemed to have a significance greater, even, than her present predicament. But she ignored the behavior of the fog in the convection currents, the splitting headache, the vile taste in her mouth. She looked straight at the trader, felt a sense of ascendancy as his eyes shifted uneasily.

But she knew that it was an empty, meaningless victory. She knew that at any moment now her body would

go down into the hot sea, to be wrangled over by the ferocious fish-lizards, the tentacular, deadly horrors that defied classification.

And while she stared steadily at the man, she fell a prey to self pity. It was hard that it should all have to end like this. Not so much the death—that comes to all—but the shame, the ignominy. For this, she had killed, had pirated the Terran spaceliner, had fled across De Kuiper's Land with the shells of the Corporation anti-aircraft batteries bursting close under her stern. And the fruits of her piracy, the price of the lives of her men and those of the police, the bribe that was to have bought Colonel Hendaye and his regiment, now became this despicable man's, to fritter away as he wished—

The alarm bells suddenly shrilled, and there was a dull shock as the launch struck something solid but yielding, heeled sharply as her keel scraped over the obstruction. And Fleming ran up the steps, and there was the sound of rapid machine gun fire, then silence, then more bursts.

The girl grinned. It sounded as though the trader had his hands full. It seemed that he must have run straight into a basking school of the big fish-lizards. And she allowed herself to hope.

When the launch heeled over it had rolled her out of the bunk. And she stretched, experimentally, and found that she could still move her legs, that she could roll over the quivering deck. And she found that, from a supine position, she could lift her feet and, even with both ankles bound, manipulate the catches of the binnacle doors with her toes. It does not take long in the telling—but in the doing it was an arduous, delicate operation, not without pain.

And it was especially painful when she pressed her bare foot against the end bearing casing of the gyro-scope. And presently there was the smell of scorching flesh, of burning skin, added to that of hot lubricating oil. And the instrument precessed inside its binnacle, rotated

clockwise on its vertical axis, and the automatic pilot faithfully followed it. And the straight line drawn on the chart did not waver in its straightness, and as far as Fleming would know—for he, as the frequent bursts of machine gun fire testified, was not overly interested in navigation—the launch was still hugging closely the rhumb line to Venusburg.

And the time came when Elspeth Van Dusen could bear the pain no longer. But she was satisfied that she had achieved her object. She could see the chart, the position she had obtained when she came on watch, and the pencilled course line running—even when steering for Port Lanning—within a few miles of the westernmost islands of the archipelago. She was confident that—unless the fog should lift—the launch would ground. And she was sure that the fish-lizards would not easily abandon the pursuit. And for a man to be engaged in a running fight and, simultaneously, to be concerned with the safe navigation of his vessel is almost an impossibility. Especially when his trust is pinned to untrustworthy instruments...

She contrived to shut the binnacle doors, wincing when she brought pressure to bear upon her scorched and blistered feet. She rolled and wriggled back to a position just under the bunk, to the place, as nearly as she could remember, to which she had been thrown when the launch heeled. And she lay, relaxed, awaiting the inevitable grounding, reserving her strength for whatever emergencies might arise. What they would be she had no way of foretelling—she could only guess. And unless she fell alive into the hands of the Venusians, her fate, no matter which way the dice fell, could be no worse than that which was already in store for her.

CHAPTER VI

SHE WAS not asleep—although she was not far from it—when the launch grounded. The stranding came in the middle of a prolonged burst of machine gun fire

from the deck. And in the interval, the long interval, between the first shock and the reversing of the engines, the powerful machinery of the launch had had time to push her well up on to the beach.

And whilst the engines were still going astern the machine gun opened up once more. Then there was silence, save for the vibration of the straining screw, and Fleming came down the companionway. He had a knife in his hand. Hypnotised, the girl stared at the gleaming blade, wondered if she had miscalculated, if her plans had miscarried.

The trader said nothing. And as he approached she saw that the light in his eyes was that of fear rather than hate. And she heard, above the throbbing of the screw, the sound of drums as the Swamplanders' coastal look-out signalled to their comrades inland the intelligence that a ship had grounded.

"You'll have to help me," he said. "You'll have to cover me with the gun while I run an anchor out astern. The fish-lizards are still waiting for us in deeper water, and the Swamplanders know that we're here..."

"Suppose I say no?"

"You won't. You daren't. You told me what they did to the Williamson woman."

"But... I can't trust you."

"And I can't trust you. When I'm carrying out the anchor you'll be pointing a machine gun at my back..." His voice was appealing. "Can't you see? We've got to trust each other."

"Have we? When you've got my pistol and a couple of million of Earth credits tucked into your belt..."

"The money? Look—" his tone was reasonable—"suppose we split fifty-fifty?"

"And you land me at Port Lanning—and give me back my gun..."

And whilst they bargained, desperately, the noise of the drums swelled, drew closer. And with much unsettled he slashed with his knife, freed her for the part that she was to play towards his—and her own?—salvation. And he tried to hurry her

when she flexed cramped limbs, when she insisted on adjusting her dress, hunting for and putting on her sandals. And the drums were very close when they finally went on deck, and their appearance was greeted by a ragged volley of rifle fire, and they could hear the saurians drawing too much water, they were, to venture into the shallows—splashing and snorting and hissing only a few yards away, but hidden from view by the sea fog.

Over the land it was relatively clear. They could see the wall of the jungle verge looming through the mist, passably distinct, but distorted, seemingly a sky-scraping cliff. And they could see the horde that was pouring from the jungle, spilling out over the marshland. And drum called to drum along the broad front of the attackers; drum answered drum from the swampy beach to the low hills inland, beyond the jungle. And there was a drum in the sky, too; a curiously regular beat that swelled as it came up from the south, that passed rapidly overhead, above the low overcast; that died to a droning mutter in the north.

Elsbeth Van Dusen ran to the machine gun. She swung the weapon in a wide arc, ignoring the bullets that went whining by on invisible wings. And the staccato song of the heavy gun was added to that of the Swamplanders' drums, of their ragged, irregular volleys. And as she fired she found time to wonder why their own machine guns, their artillery, were never in evidence, were called in only when all else had failed. Perhaps, she thought, anything more powerful, more deadly, than a rifle is, somehow, sacred, is to be used only after prayer and fasting... And her lips curled in a thin line of amusement as she watched her tracer, bright in the dull, hazy air, sweep the Swamplanders' front, watched the attack surge back like a spent wave.

"Cover the sea!" shouted Fleming.

HE WAS in the shallow water—only up to his knees, it was, and

he had slung over his shoulder the anchor from the starboard hawsepipe. And he had thrown the windlass out of gear so that, as he waded aft, the chain rattled slowly out of the locker. And as he saw the girl looking at him he took one hand from his burden, gestured down to the wallet at his belt. "It's all here, he cried. "So I'd better come back..."

The girl thought: I suppose so. But it's a pity. The brute is too strong—there aren't many men who could carry that anchor out... And he's still got my gun... But I'm playing for my life as much as the money—and if he does break his bargain he'll have our agents on Earth to deal with... If I'm alive to tip them off...

And she loosed off a burst to warn off the saurians that were still splashing and hissing and grunting in the fog just outside the shallows; and she swung the gun rapidly to deal with a fresh attack that came surging out of the jungle.

The rattling of the cable over the gypsies of the windlass ceased. She looked behind her, her finger still on the trigger of the gun, her tracer still sweeping the jungle verge, and saw Fleming wading back. She saw the muscles of his torso bulge as he hoisted himself over the gunwale. And then he went to the windlass, threw it in gear, started the motor that would, he hoped, heave the launch clear of the sand bar.

From the north came the sound of the strange drum in the sky again. And from the jungle the Swamplanders' drums answered, drowning it in a great wave of sound. And the machine gun jammed as the forward swinging breech block pulled a defective round in two, jammed the projectile into the chamber and dropped the battered cartridge case into the recoil-actuated mechanism. Fleming looked up at the abrupt cessation of the sound that was to him, to both of them, a song of hope—then began to heave fast and yet faster at his sternwards leading cable.

The chain tightened, the links rattled over the gypsies, down into the chain locker. And the launch did not

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move. It was obvious that the anchor had failed to take hold, was dragging through the soft sand of the bottom.

With cold desperation Elspeth Van Dusen worked to clear the jammed gun. She forced herself to forget all else but the intricacy of interacting working parts, the bent and battered cartridge case, the propellant scattered over the mechanism, the round in the chamber. And she got it working, and she loosed off the first burst at the onrushing Swamplanders—had it not been their intention to take the man and the girl alive their rifle fire, inaccurate though it was, would have accounted for them long since—and suddenly realised that the drum in the sky was overpoweringly loud.

Swooping down at them was a jet plane. She recognised it as one of those, fitted with a primitive, fixed drive, that had been turned out in the Corporation's workshops at Port Lemaire. On the underside of the short, stubby wings was a golden, rayed sun—the insignia of the Corporation. And from the guns in its nose a stream of shells drew a line of angry fire and smoke across the wet sand, straight for the launch. And she saw the vaned, black shape detach itself from the plane's belly, fall with deceptive slowness. She threw herself prone behind her gun, waited long seconds for the burst—and knew that the falling bomb must, inevitably, take her for its target.

SHE SAT up, coughing and retching. The acrid fumes of high explosive were a bitter poison in her lungs. And when the deck heaved gently beneath her she knew that this was only an effect of the nausea, the shock.

She opened her eyes.

The deck—only scarred by the shells from the Corporation plane's guns, by the splinters from its bomb—was heaving. Blast is a freakish thing. In this case it had lifted the launch and thrown it into the deeper water just clear of the sand bar.

The windlass motor was still running. And the anchor lifted from the

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bottom, rattled against the bows, jammed in the hawsepipe. The windlass strained and complained. The girl ran forward, switched off, realised that Fleming was not on board.

Fleming was where the launch had been. He was stretched supine on the grey sand. Blood from the gasping wound in his side turned the sand from grey to black. But he was not dead. He stirred, tried to raise himself on one arm. He started to scream. And a murmurous background to the thin, pitiful sound was the fast diminishing thunder of the drive of the Corporation ship, the mutter of distant drums from the jungle, where the Swamplanders had retreated.

Throwing the windlass out of gear, the girl let go the anchor. She

dived, struck out for the beach. After a few strokes she found bottom, was able to walk, to splash and struggle through the warm, muddy water. And then she was standing over Fleming. He looked up at her, and stopped screaming. He looked at her as though she was the most beautiful thing in his world. And then the expression on his face faded, was replaced by a horrified incredulity as she knelt beside him, undid the fastenings of his belt, stood erect with the belt and the wallet and the holster in her hands.

When she was buckling it around her own waist—such was her relief at recovering the twice stolen money that she did not think to step back out of reach—he clutched her leg.

"You can't leave me!" he cried. "You can't! You can't!"

Dispassionately she looked down at him. She saw the wound in his side, the splinters of white bone protruding from the bloody, pulped flesh. She knew that she, with the aid of the medical kit carried by the launch, could never hope to save his life. And that his life was not worth saving. She felt no sense of loyalty, of obligation. Accident had made them members of the same species—but that was all.

She tried to break away, but he clung to her. His fingers bruised the flesh of her ankle. And when she attempted to walk towards the water, the waiting launch, she only succeeded in dragging him a scant inch or so over the sand. She stopped, then, stood listening to the drums, to the staccato melody that told that the Venusians, frightened off by the display of Terran power, were mustering their courage for a last attack. She kicked, hard, with her free foot. The trader whimpered, the tears ran down his face, but he did not relax his hold.

She pulled the pistol from its holster. Fleming cried out when he saw the ugly weapon, started to scream again. And the crashing report drowned his high, thin shrieking, and his grip on the girl's ankle relaxed and she pulled clear and stood, for a brief second, looking down at the sprawling, ungraceful body. There

was no pity on her face. There was a faint shadow of what could have been regret. She was remembering the bodies she had seen—and the disgust, and the bitter, impotent grief and rage—when the rebels stormed Palmer's Ford, over-ran the defences that had been hastily thrown up around the Corporation prison there. She remembered the torture room of the Corporation police. Her own lover had been among those who had been put to death there. He had died, at last, only an hour or so before the surprise attack.

And she was sorry that this loyal servant of the Corporation had died a swift, clean death by her gun instead of a more lingering one under the Swamplanders' knives.

But it couldn't be helped.

And as she waded out through the shallows the drums swelled to a crescendo, and the first of the fresh attack was advancing on broad, webbed feet over the marsh.

WHEN THE ship loomed out of the thinning mists—there was no warning, for all the electronic equipment had been put out of commission by the explosion—she put the wheel hard over, turned to run. Then she saw the ripple of red at the stranger's gaff recognised the high fore-castle head, the bridge set well aft, the twin rocket batteries at the bow. It could only be *Madrileno*—late *Aphrodite* of the Corporation's service. And when the rocket roared from one of the auxiliary cruiser's bow projectors, burst in the water just forward of the launch's stem, she had already stopped, had thrown the engines into reverse.

She lit the last of Fleming's precious cigarettes, sat quietly and waited, grateful for the respite, for the opportunity to let responsibility fall on other shoulders than her own. The *Odyssey* that had started at the Port Lemaire landing field, in far away De Kuyper's Land, was at last finished.

And some shift of wind, some freak of conductivity, brought quivering life to the hot, humid air; a

(Please turn to Page 129)

(Continued from Page 37)

the field edge and out. He grinned.

"I always knew my lapses meant something!" he said. "Imagine lapsing" fifteen thousand years into the past! Fortunately, thanks to you and the zranthon tube, we can 'lapse' an equal time into the future!"

"You'll forgive the long years of hatred, mother?" he asked. I felt like an intruder. "If I had just seen you as you are, I'd never have doubted you, never! I've been longing for you so long, all of you..." and he called Baird and Partos names I had never heard before, would never hear again in my lifetime. "You'll forgive us if we hurry, Mr. Lowre?" said Joe X. "I'm anxious to get home."

I had to agree, though now I understood the sadness in the eyes of Marya Madone. Joe X turned, stepped into the zranthon field with his mother in his arms, his two brothers beside him.

They began to fade out, swiftly.

WHEN THEY were gone nothing remained of the field or the zranthon tube. It was as if the field and the tube were being denied use in my time. Yet I agreed that this was just and right.

The easy chair remained.

I don't believe in reincarnation, and what Marya Madone said just as she sped away into the future to rejoin her husband, taking the rest of her family with her, may have been a slip of the tongue. And yet, I could never believe her capable of such a slip. Hadn't she said that her family "wishes you to know all?"

There was that nagging statement of Joe X, too, when he had told me that yes, he knew he had two brother trins. "One is Yesterday, One Today, One Tomorrow!" Did he mean that individual man existed *mentally* not only in the past, present and future, but *physically* as well?

I felt, almost, as if my experiences with the zranthon field indicated an affirmative answer.

This is what Marya said to me as she vanished, her very last words:

"You have not really lost me, Ryal Madone!"

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BEHIND THE ATE BALL

A Martian Oddity

The wife of the Mayor of Eastern Canalopolis, Mars, was very nervous. She hopped about like a sand-flea. It was all because of that man who was coming to dinner.

It was not every night that the Mayor's wife entertained an Earthman for supper; this was the first time in Zumbarian (Martian) history that a Karterian (Earthman) was to dine on Mars. Ray Bradford was the first rocketeer to reach our neighbor planet.

Mrs. Aardvark (whose name purely by cosmic coincidence coincided with that of a popular terrestrial crossword puzzle pet) was quite upset at the progress of her preparations. Her ten tentacles twitched and she wished she had as many hands as she tried to manage her pots and pans with only three pairs. Mrs. Aardvark was world famous (Mars-world, that is) for the excellence of her cuisine (a French word, which did not exist on Mars) and her husband had impressed upon her that on this historic occasion she must reach a culinary pinnacle.

By divine providence, Bradford had landed on the left bank of Canalopolis, ancient home of the green Martians, who were traditional enemies of the purple Martians of the right bank, who were now green with envy. Mayor Aardvark was extremely anxious to make a resounding hit with the hero from Earth by having prepared for him a meal that would, as the Earthmen were fond of saying, "melt in his mouth". Aardvark—in fact all Martians—was fairly familiar with Earthian sayings, for interplanetary radio had been operating on Mars for several years now. Every cultured green Martian was acquainted

with Karterian (or English) in addition to Vrest Zumbarian (high Martian) as opposed to the *dantix-inferno* or low Martian mumbled on the wrong side of the Grand Canal.

Mayor Aardvark had heard it said, on the Camel Soup Hour, that "the way to a man's heart is thru his stomach". Certain physiologists, never having seen an Earthman, argued that this meant Earthmen's hearts were located behind their stomachs, but Mayor Aardvark interpreted this saying on a poetic rather than a biological basis.

At last Phobos and Deimos, the double moons on Mars, rose in the evening sky, and Mr. Bradford, the man from the planet with only one satellite, sat at the dinner table of Mrs. Aardvark. Mrs. Aardvark, as women will, mentally appraised Mr. Bradford, and while she found him wanting in certain Martian qualities, she liked him at once because he looked her straight in the eye. Let us be charitable to Mrs. Aardvark's mentality and say that she was unusually upset, otherwise she would have realized Mr. Bradford had no choice: It was rather disconcerting that he should have two eyes rather than the normal one.

Then, too, Mrs. Aardvark noticed, the Earthman suffered a lack of a full set of arms, and had no tentacles at all, which paucity of charms made Mrs. Aardvark feel very sorry for Mr. Bradford's wife. (This was a sympathy she might well have spared the rocketeer as he was in fact a misogynistic bachelor who had fled Earth to escape the tentacles—purely figurative, of course—of a neurotic nymphomaniac.)

Finally, Mr. Bradford was so small (only 6'3") that he had to be accommodated in the baby's high-chair. But aside from his midget proportions, and amazing white color, he looked almost Martian.

The household pets—all 17 of them—were fed first, of course, according to Zubarian custom; and then the guest was invited to eat.

(Continued On Next Page)

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